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Research paper

Semantic comparison of the emotional values communicated by destinations and tourists on social media

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ABSTRACT

Emotional values play a key role in the creation of destination brands. Nowadays destination management organizations (DMOs) want to make sure that they transmit a set of attractive, distinguishing values and that they are correctly perceived by their visitors. This paper presents a new methodology for the automated, unsupervised semantic analysis of large quantities of tweets sent by the DMOs and the visitors of a destination. As a case study, the results of an analysis of 60,000 tweets related to 10 major European destinations, are presented and the emotional values transmitted from the official Twitter accounts of the destinations compared with those communicated by the tourists in their personal messages. The experiment leads to two important results: the cities examined do not communicate a personalized identity and there are strong discrepancies between the emotional values transmitted by DMOs and those reflected by the comments of visitors. The framework presented in this work constitutes the first semantic methodology for a large-scale automatic analysis of the communication of emotional values by destinations through social media.

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1. Introduction

In the current, globalized scenario, tourist destinations need to differentiate themselves from their competitors to stand out from the crowd and attract more tourists, investors or residents (Morgan & Pritchard, 2004). To this end, destination marketing organizations (DMOs) manage their identity and brand. Destination brands associate emotional values and tangible attractions to territories, with the intention of identifying and distinguishing them (Blain, Levy, & Ritchie, 2005; Morgan, Pritchard, & Piggott, 2003). Many attractive tourist destinations have similar strengths (e.g. five-star accommodations, cultural assets, or sun-and-beach activities), so it is the emotional side of the brand, its personality or identity, which may help them to capture the attention of potential visitors and beat their competitors (Morgan & Pritchard, 2004).

The great contribution of brands has been the establishment of

relationships with tourists and the generation of connections and emotional ties with them (Laroche, Habibi, & Richard, 2013; Zhang, Pan, Smith, & Li, 2009). It has been argued (Morgan & Pritchard, 2004) that tourists mostly base their consumption decisions on these relationships and on the emotional bonds created with the territories, rather than on rational decisions or on the physical attractions featured by destinations. Therefore, the first challenge for DMOs is to communicate these emotional values, alongside its identity and brand, with the aim of generating this emotional differentiation.

In the last ten years, social media have revolutionized the communication of tourist destinations (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). It is now commonly accepted that the comments and experiences of other users (who are supposed to lack any personal interest on a particular location) have much greater credibility to the eyes of potential tourists than the official information provided by DMOs (Fotis, Buhalis, & Rossides, 2012; Litvin, Goldsmith, & Pan, 2008; Mack, Bloise, & Pan, 2008; Xiang & Gretzel, 2010) and they heavily influence their choice of travel destinations (Buhalis & Costa, 2006; Schmallegger & Carson, 2009; Yoo & Gretzel, 2010; Zhang et al., 2009). In addition, studies in the field of communication (Huertas, 2014; Macnamara & Zeffass, 2012; Valentini, 2015; Wigley & Lewis, 2012) have shown that social media allow the

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creation of a continuing dialogue with users and the building of a relationship with them. This process increases the identification of users with the destination and its brand and permits them the creation of a better picture of the emotional identity of the place (Govers, Go, & Kumar, 2007; Mariné-Roig, 2013; Stepchenkova & Zhan, 2013). Social media also allow tourists to share their travel experiences and emotions through reviews, comments, photographs or videos (Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh, & Gremler, 2004; Senecal & Nantel, 2004). All these feedback directly impact the emotional part of potential tourists and provide a better image of the destinations (Inversini & Buhalis, 2009; Marchiori & Cantoni, 2011; Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). Therefore, sharing experiences by other users via social media generates an emotional attachment to the destination and to its brand (Algesheimer, Dholakia, & Herrmann, 2005).

Therefore, social media are key tools in the emotional communication of destination brands. Despite this several recent studies (Huertas & Mariné-Roig, 2015; Huertas, Setó-Pàmies, & Míguez-González, 2015; Míguez-González & Huertas, 2015) have shown that destinations focus more on the communication of tangible tourist attractions than on the transmission of emotional values. This paper takes a deeper look to the latter: thus, the first objective is to analyze the communication of the emotional values of brands through Twitter by some of Europe's leading tourist destinations. In order to perform a comprehensive examination of a large number of tweets, the paper develops and implements a novel methodological framework in which an automated semantic analysis of the content of the tweets is made. In this analysis the adjectives used in the tweets are linked with the core emotional values of a travel destination, which have been characterized with a revised and adapted version of Aaker's brand personality scale (Aaker, 1997).

Furthermore, destination brands are key in building the image that public and potential tourists create from a destination and these images have a positive influence on the selection of the destinations to be visited (Kim, Kim, & Bolls, 2014). Thus, individuals who have created an image of a destination are more likely to visit it (Lee & Gretzel, 2012) and the chances increase even more if the image is positive. The relationship between the brand and image of a destination is so close that many academics use the two concepts interchangeably. For some authors (Anholt, 2008), the brand is merely the public image of a territory created in the users' minds from their direct perceptions and external inputs of various kinds. Although the brand may be understood as the identity or image, which can be viewed as two sides of the same coin, from the communications point of view it is of paramount importance that the identity that DMOs want to transmit matches with the image perceived by tourists. A positive matching will be a clear sign that the destination brand is well established and communicated, and that the place has achieved the desired differentiated positioning (Huertas, 2014). Therefore, a second grand challenge for DMOs is to make sure that the brand identifies the territory and that it also matches with the image perceived by the public: that is, that there is a correlation between image and identity. Thus, the second objective of this research is to analyze and compare the emotional brand values communicated through Twitter by DMOs with those described by their visitors through their personal tweets.

In summary, the main contributions of this paper are threefold. First, the paper presents a new methodology for the automated, unsupervised semantic analysis of large quantities of tweets sent by the DMOs or the visitors of a city. This framework may be useful for the researchers in the field and for the DMOs themselves, insofar as it may be used to make a self-assessment of the communication of their brand. After that, the paper presents the exhaustive results of the analysis of 30,000 tweets from 10 major

European destinations, which studies the number of *emotional adjectives* they use and how many times they employ them. Finally, the same methodology is used to analyze 30,000 tweets from visitors of the same cities and the emotional values transmitted from the official Twitter accounts of the destinations is compared with those communicated by the tourists in their personal messages.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows. Section 2 includes a brief state of the art on the methods employed in destination branding studies to analyze messages in social media. The next section explains the new methodological framework defined in this work, which permits the study to associate adjectives to emotional values in a semantic and fully unsupervised fashion. Sections 4 and 5 present and discuss in detail the results of the automated analysis of 60,000 English-language tweets, which reflect the transmission and the perception of emotional values by 10 major European destinations. The final section presents the conclusions and some lines of future work.

2. State of the art

In recent years, there have been two main kinds of studies related to the evaluation of the communication of the identities and brands of territories. The first is based on numerical analysis whereas the second one focuses on content analysis. These two types of works are commented in the following subsections.

2.1. Numerical methods of analysis

This kind of evaluation methods performs a numerical analysis of the communication between DMOs and tourists, measuring aspects such as the number of followers/friends a destination has in social media, the number of comments they post, and the number of reactions generated among users (e.g. replies, retweets, and number of 'likes'). There are already many automated tools that measure these purely quantitative aspects of communication.

An example of this type of analysis is the work reported in Guerrero-Solé and Fernández-Cavia (2015), which considered various quantitative communication aspects to analyze the brand of Spain at three levels of diffusion of information. At the first level (the diffusion of messages by the state-level main touristic account, @Spain) they measured the number of messages published by this account and the number of times it mentioned other users. At the second level, two analytical measures were used: the number of retweets of the messages posted by @Spain and the number of mentions of @Spain. The number of retweets of the messages in which @Spain was mentioned was analysed at the third level. Another example of this type of works is Huertas and Mariné-Roig (2015), which measured the average reaction to top posts per destination type by calculating the total posts and the average number of likes, comments and shares for 37 Spanish destinations located in five autonomous communities (Andalusia, Canary Islands, Catalonia, Galicia, and Madrid).

This kind of numerical study is quite easy to undertake and they intend to provide a measure of the influence of a destination in the social media. However, there are works such as Guerrero-Solé and Fernández-Cavia (2014) that show that there is not a direct relationship between the dimension of the communication of a destination and its importance, showing clearly the need to make more complex analysis of the communicated content.

2.2. Content analysis methods

Content analysis refers to a family of procedures for the systematic, replicable analysis of text. These methods enable

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