



Tracking the evolution of a destination's image by text-mining online reviews - the case of Macau

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ABSTRACT

It has during the last decade become a common practice for tourists to post an account of their travel experience online. This article uses text-mining techniques to investigate the evolution of the content of TripAdvisor online reviews about Macau between 2005 and 2013. In the course of this period, the number of such reviews exploded, starting from almost nothing, at the same time as Macau as a tourist destination metamorphosed itself from a quaint footnote to Hong Kong into the 'Las Vegas of the East'. Moreover, over the period, a number of new non-gambling attractions became also available to visitors. The article then compares the evolution of the user-generated online content to the one of the image of Macau as projected by the official destination promoter over the period. This comparison reveals that while the latter projects essentially the same image over time, the TripAdvisor reviews exhibit some clear trends.

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1. Introduction

Tourist information search and destination image are topics that have received considerable attention in the tourism literature (Crofts, 1999; Fodness & Murray, 1997; Gunn, 1979; Pan & Fesenmaier, 2006). To understand how prospective tourists acquire information is particularly important to destination marketing organizations (Morgan, Pritchard, & Pride, 2004; Pike & Ryan, 2004; Usaki & Baloglu, 2011). Moreover, insights into the process of information acquisition help such organizations develop appropriate strategies toward specific market segments (Carson, 2008; Jacobsen, 1997). The sources of information about a destination are both officially and privately produced destination 'markers'. The former convey the official view which of course tends to project a positive image of the destination (Long & Reeves, 2009; Wong, 2013). Private markers can be divided into commercial and non-commercial ones (McKercher & Wong, 2013; Wong & McKercher, 2012). Even though official marker providers have little or no control over the producers of commercial markers, such as travel agencies, tour operators and hotels, those often promote a destination in accord with the content of the official markers because the interests of the two kinds of information providers are to a large extent aligned (Palmer, 1994). In contrast, non-commercial private information such as provided by the press, other media or travel websites may deliver an altogether different message and not be consistent with each other (Patil, 2011; Pretes, 2003).

It has during the last years become a global trend that tourists post and share their travel experiences on line, often on online social media that

are well known to the public and easy to find and consult. The reach of this medium is thus enormous. Such data are often called user-generated data (Pan & Fesenmaier, 2006). They not only shape the overall image of a destination, but may also create awareness by prospective tourists who may receive such information incidentally by browsing social media websites, thereby stimulating their motivation for travelling to a particular destination (Volo, 2010). Spontaneous accounts of 'actual-consumption' experiences are obviously valuable and are being shared on the internet through what amounts to a global electronic word-of-mouth communication network (Aye, Au, & Law, 2013; Litvin, Goldsmith, & Pan, 2007). The user-generated content of the online reviews is accordingly today recognized as an important component in the construction of a destination's image (Yeoh, Othman, & Ahmad, 2013). Those online reviews have become significant 'markers' of destinations online, where they complement - and compete with - information supplied by commercial entities and official destination promoters. Though research on this theme is growing, the literature mostly reports on tourists' travel experiences, on the different images of a destination that are projected by reviewers of different cultural backgrounds, as well as on managerial implications (Carson, 2008; Choi, Lehto, & Morrison, 2007; Leung, Rob, & Lee, 2011; Pan & Li, 2011; Sun, Ryan, & Pan, 2014). While those studies provide important insights, they all present accounts of a destination's image at a particular point in time.

Advances in technology have lately stimulated the popularity of searching for non-commercial travel information on the internet and there is a growing literature on the subject (Gursoy & McCleary, 2003; Law, Qi, & Buhalis, 2010). Unlike the commercial and official markers, that typically present only the positive aspects of a destination, user-generated content such as the one of online reviews is free to disseminate

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alternative information and assessments that may not be congruent with the ones offered by commercial or official markers (Sharda & Ponnada, 2006). User-generated content is based on tourists' individual perspectives and personal experiences. Today it represents the bulk of the private non-commercial markers of a destination (Johnson & Kayne, 2003; Litvin et al., 2007, p. 461). There are some concerns about the credibility of user-generated content as well as the trustworthiness of online media (Ibrahim, 2008; Litvin et al., 2007; Dickinger, 2011). Nevertheless, user-generated content is reported to be influential in shaping prospective tourists' perception of destinations' images and affecting their vacation planning. As Ayele et al. (2013) argue, credibility is not a characteristic inherent in the source of information but a judgment made by the inquirers. Filieri (2015) provides an up-to-date survey of the issue. There are credibility issues as well regarding information found in magazines, television programs, official media, guidebooks, etc. The fact that the recipient of information has to be critical does not change the analysis of what is presented to him/her, such as the one done here.

If one were to initiate a study of the evolution of a destination's image over a particular period of time, through interviews for example, one will have to perform a survey in each one of a number of years before being able to reach a conclusion; this would require a multi-year project. To undertake on the other hand a retrospective study of how a destination's image has evolved in the past is practically impossible without having a repository of comparable evidence about this image as it was in the past. It is here that online social media such as TripAdvisor are invaluable because they are such rich repositories: the reviews posted in the past are still available today in full and the *modus operandi* of collecting and publishing those reviews has not changed over time, making them comparable. For any practical purpose, text-mining the many online reviews found on sites such as TripAdvisor is the only practical way to study the evolution of a destination's image. Text-mining tools suitable for such a purpose are now widely available. The approach is somewhat akin to comparing the successive past editions of a guidebook or the articles of the successive past issues of a travel magazine, but it has the advantage that it is past visitors themselves who have written the web reviews. Surprisingly, this approach does not seem to have attracted much attention from the tourism researchers. Knowing the recent evolution of a destination's image is obviously useful for the management of a destination, for example to evaluate the degree of success of past promotional efforts.

This article uses specific text-mining technique to investigate the evolution of the content of TripAdvisor reviews about Macau between 2005 and 2013. The period is particularly significant in the history of both TripAdvisor and Macau. In the course of this period, the number of Macau reviews on TripAdvisor exploded, starting from almost nothing, and Macau as a tourist destination metamorphosed itself from a quaint footnote to Hong Kong into the 'Las Vegas of the East'. A significant number of new gambling and non-gambling attractions became available to the visitors during this period, which saw an enormous increase in their number. About some 29 million people visited Macau in 2013, with some 26 million coming from Greater China (Mainland China 64%, Hong Kong 23.1% and Taiwan 3.4%). About 14.3 million visitors (49%) stayed overnight and the average length of stay is a modest 1.9 days (MGTO, 2005–2014). Macau today includes the Macau peninsula, the Taipa and Coloane islands, and Cotai. The Cotai 'strip' is located on the newly reclaimed land where local and international gaming corporate giants have built the bulk of the new integrated casino/hotel/entertainment/shopping complexes of the territory. The city's two major economic pillars are gaming and tourism, with its gaming revenues already overtaking the ones of Las Vegas by 2009. By the end of 2013, they were seven times larger. The actual casinos, i.e. the gaming rooms where gambling take place, are found mostly inside the spectacular resort hotels of the Cotai strip, of which the Venetian - for now - is the most impressive. Those resort hotels offer all kinds of shopping, dining and entertainment opportunities and a visitor need not be interested in gambling to spend time in their cavernous and lavish spaces.

Macau also has a famous UNESCO-sanctioned historic center that testifies of its long colonial history under Portuguese rule. This historic center is located in the Macau peninsula, quite apart from the Cotai strip. Thus, a tourist motivated exclusively by heritage and culture need not see any casino at all during his visit. Likewise, a tourist motivated by either gambling and/or spending time indulging in the non-gambling activities offered by the resort complexes can ignore the part of the city where the heritage attractions are located. In effect, Macau offers to visitors three kinds of attractions: 1) Gambling proper, 2) Non-gambling leisure activities in both the city and the resort complexes offering shopping malls, restaurants, shows (some free, some not) and visual stimulation, and 3) Heritage attractions. A visitor to Macau can consume any combination of those he or she cares for. In that respect, Macau is unique in offering - in addition to gambling - a blend of authenticity for the modern tourist and simulacra for the post-modern one in a very compact space. In addition, a number of short duration events periodically attract special-interest visitors to the territory, the most famous one being the Macau Grand Prix in November. A number of questions about the effect that the recent changes that have taken place in Macau could have on its image as a destination come to mind. One might wonder for example whether the widely disseminated 'Las Vegas the East' new label of Macau could not actually be detrimental to its aura as a destination for cultural or heritage tourism. It suggests not only fun and glitz but also vulgarity, sleaze and tackiness. It is likely for that reason that, as documented below, the image of Macau that the official tourism promoter presents eschews any reference to gambling. Another question is whether the new attractions are successful in getting the attention of the international visitors, the extent of which could be gauged by consulting the online reviews posted over the relevant period of time, as done here.

The next section gives a review of the relevant literature on tourism information search, online user-generated content as well as destination image formation. The methodology adopted in this study is then presented, followed by the content analysis that constitutes the main research results. This section is followed by a short comparative presentation of the official tourism promotion message that the Macau Government Tourism Office (MGTO) delivered over the same period. The last section provides a concluding discussion of the results, draws some managerial implications and suggests directions for future research.

2. Literature review: destination image

The literature reports that to reduce the uncertainties associated with travelling to an unfamiliar destination, to allow a better use of resources and to enhance trip quality, tourists seek information that helps them identify and evaluate options before making travel and holiday decisions (Fodness & Murray, 1997; McIntosh & Goeldner, 1990; Moutinho, 1987). Baloglu and McCleary (1999) note that different types of tourism information have various degrees of influence on prospective tourist's perception of a destination. To Leiper (1990) such 'markers' play an important role in the information brokering process as well as in the creation of a destination's image. The official markers promote only the State-endorsed account of what is 'the best' in a destination and disseminate information that is considered to be 'desirable' and 'appropriate' (Wong, 2013). For example, Patil (2011) reports that the official master narrative endorsed by the Indian authorities privileges the Hindu/Aryan/Vedic identity and that the official tourism promotion material and websites avoid references to the unpalatable and contested history of conflicts between different groups and confine themselves to descriptions of a timeless culture. Many other examples could be given. Commercial providers of markers, such as travel agencies, airlines and hotels tend to promote a destination in accord with the State-endorsed view (Palmer, 1994; Quiroga, 1990). Mc Kercher and Wong (2013) examine the type and content of website markers, including both the official and private commercial ones, used in 91 different Hong Kong tour products that cover four different styles of tours. Though disparities exist across different markers, commercial markers in general promote Hong Kong in accord with the State-

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