PROJECTING A DESTINATION IMAGE THROUGH FACEBOOK: THE ROLE AND CHALLENGES OF DESTINATION MANAGEMENT ORGANIZATIONS

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Abstract:

This study explores how the image of a destination - an intermediate city of South America- is projected by the DMO on the official Facebook page, and how this social networking is managed by the DMO. To this end, 454 posts from the official DMO's Facebook page over one year, consisting of text, illustrations (photographs, banners, graphics) and videos, were analysed using two approaches, inductive and deductive. Findings reveal that posts mainly comprise places in the city -tourist hot spots- and dismiss activities and people (locals and visitors), which projects the image of a mass tourism destination. Content is mainly informative and not always on tourism-related topics. The pandemic significantly impacted the type of content published during the study period. The DMO fails to project on Facebook a consistent and well-differentiated image of the city. The DMO's lack of political independence from the local government influences the content and purpose of the publications. The study reflects the impact of social networks on the projection of the image of a destination. It highlights the usefulness of visual resources in tourism promotion and their possible impact on the expectations and motivations of potential visitors. Furthermore, it outlines an approach to assessing the projected image of a destination through social media by categorizing three elements -places, activities, and people- shown in the posts. The current work offers valuable insights to DMOs on social media management strategies, especially Facebook.

Keywords: Projected image, Facebook, social media, Destination Management Organizations, COVID-19

1. INTRODUCTION

Projected destination image refers to the holistic impression made by a destination through different information agents, one of them the Destination Management Organizations, DMOs (Echtner & Ritchie, 1991; Tasci & Gartner, 2007). The supply side is responsible for the so-called *induced information,* which comprises the advertising and marketing strategies intended to communicate a positive (desired) image of the destination to consumers (Beerli & Martin,

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2004; Kislali et al., 2019). The projected image of a destination is a key aspect of tourism planning because it can persuade potential tourists, attract visitors and influence their behaviour (Kim & Yoon, 2013; Költringer & Dickinger, 2015). The projected image affects the competitiveness of a destination and its perceived touristic value (Bigné et al., 2000). The projected image is an intangible component of the territory, therefore the importance of being strong, positive, and stuck to reality (Gil et al., 2012).

When promoting a destination, social media has gained enormous relevance, to the extent of being considered by marketers as a key tool to effectively persuade both visitors and potential visitors (Hysa et al., 2021). In this vein, many DMOs see social networking sites as an opportunity to improve their tourism destination images (Kim et al., 2017). Given the impact of social media on destination marketing, scholars have gradually started to focus on the effect of social media on the projected image (Bernkopf & Nixon 2019; Ghazali & Cai, 2013; Költringer & Dickinger, 2015; Lim et al., 2012; Llodra-Riera et al., 2015; Mak, 2017; Song et al., 2021; Stepchenkova & Zhan, 2013). However, it is claimed that DMOs remain naive in this field (Bernkopf & Nixon, 2019): most DMOs use social media to promote destinations spontaneously, without a defined strategy. There are still some research gaps since studies on social media strategies by DMOs are seldom (Molina et al., 2020) and should focus on a wide variety of tourism organisations as well as on different geographical regions (Munar, 2012). Similarly, research on using social media for image-building is incipient (Ghazali & Cai, 2013). As a result, it is crucial to understand how social media impacts destination image (Költringer & Dickinger, 2015). This question is relevant in modern times when most social media posts consist of visual resources, mainly photos and videos (Bernkopf & Nixon, 2019), and every format has the power to shape a different destination image (Song et al., 2021).

Facebook is one of the social networks with the greatest impact and the most used by DMOs (Stankov et al., 2018). DMOs create Facebook pages to build a destination identity -project an image- (Lim et al., 2012). Although some research has focused on using Facebook by DMOs for destination promotion (Galvez-Rodriguez et al., 2020; Kumar et al., 2022; Molina et al., 2020; Stankov et al., 2018), studies on Facebook and the building of a destination image are scarce. One of the few studies concluded that the quality of information conveyed on this social networking site "has a direct influence on the process of tourists' destination image formation" (Rodríguez et al., 2020, p. 1562). In this context, this study aims (1) to explore how the *Fundación de Turismo para Cuenca* (from now on the DMO) projects the image of Cuenca-Ecuador through the official Facebook page, and (2) to observe the management of the official Facebook page by its DMO.

The study focuses on an intermediate South American city, intending to approach the reality of medium-sized urban destinations of tourist interest. For this purpose, all posts from the official Facebook page of the DMO: https://www.facebook.com/FundacionTurismoCuenca were collected over one year, from July 2020 to June 2021. A total of 537 publications were identified, of which 454 were content analysed. The posts comprised text, illustrations (photographs, banners, graphics), and videos. These are three of the most popular formats on social networks (Villamediana-Pedrosa et al., 2019).

After analysing the content of the text, illustrations, and videos, it was found that the DMO's publications mainly promote places of the city and dismiss activities and people (locals and visitors). In addition, the analysis showed that the publications are mainly informative and not always about tourism. The pandemic significantly impacted the type of content published in the study period. On the other hand, the DMO of Cuenca-Ecuador fails to project on Facebook a

consistent image of the city since it does not respond to strategic planning. Similarly, the DMO's lack of political independence from the local government influences the content and purpose of the publications. In general terms, the content does not contribute to projecting a solid and well-differentiated image, i.e. it does not reflect a landmark or flagship of the city for promotional purposes.

The study contributes to reflecting the impact of social networks in the projection of the image of a destination. It highlights the usefulness of visual resources in tourism promotion, illustrations, and videos and their possible impact on the expectations and motivations of potential visitors. Moreover, the current work offers valuable insights to DMOs on social media management strategies, especially Facebook. The objective of the publications and the narrative they use to promote destinations should be reconsidered. From a methodological perspective, this study outlines an approach to assessing the projected image of a destination through social media by categorizing three elements -places, activities, and people- shown in the posts.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Role of DMOs in projecting the image of a destination

According to Munar (2012), DMOs' main tasks are (1) to define marketing strategies, including the management of information about the destination, (2) to undertake initiatives to improve the destination offer, and (3) to coordinate tourism planning and development. Therefore, defining and communicating an image that allows them to position the destination effectively is part of their priorities. The strategies must be very well-designed since they are an advertising medium that reaches various audiences with different tastes and motivations, and contributes to creating the destination brand. DMOs should generate advertising in different media, considering the type of traveler they need to attract to the destination (Jeon et al., 2018), presenting the reality and avoiding their own perceptions of the destination - usually influenced by political and economic interests - (Hunter, 2016; Marine-Roig &Ferrer-Rosell, 2018).

In tourism planning, the destination, the infrastructure, and the travel experience, are not unique conditions for the tourism development of a destination, but its tourism vocation must also be considered (UNWTO, 1998). In this context, DMOs should plan the image to project in consistency with the attributes and values of the destination. Furthermore, the projected image is relevant for both visitors and residents of the destination, since both will share the geographical space in a harmonious relationship (Uğur, 2017). Therefore, DMOs should consider both the visitor's needs and the tourist offer added value for the destination (Hölzl, 2019). In this way, the projected image promotes a local identity of high interest for tourists (Pfeffer-Hoffmann & Hendricks, 2011).

However, most DMOs face several challenges: they should respond to different interests, not only from the tourism sector but also from political authorities, the host community, and other local stakeholders (Munar, 2012). As a result, some DMOs have changed their initial focus on marketing activities to a focus on institutional management (Stankov et al., 2018). Then, it is pertinent to reconsider the objective and role for which DMOs were created.

The media used by DMOs have diversified over time, from written material such as brochures and postcards to digital media such as videos. Furthermore, with the appearance and development of the Internet and Web 2.0, the tourist promotion of a destination has also extended to social networks and other online tools (Stepchenkova & Zhan, 2013). However, this rapid transformation of Web 2.0 has generated specific difficulties for DMOs in terms of

establishing strategies for the use of social networks in the long term (Munar, 2012). Other challenges are the informal knowledge (lack of trained personnel), the organizational culture (traditional structures), and the lack of a top-management-level strategic vision. All these factors have brought about a dynamic of trial and error (Munar, 2012).

2.2 Projected image and social networks

Social media's emergence and rapid development have made it a key player in marketing destinations (Molina et al., 2020; Munar, 2012;). From the demand side, social media is present at every stage of the travellers' journey: pre-trip (information search), during (organization of the trip), and post-trip (sharing memories) (Hysa et al., 2021). From the supply side, social media is used by tourism practitioners with several purposes, such as: promotion, product distribution, communication, management and research (Leung et al., 2013). However, in the case of DMOs, using social media is not enough; selecting the right platform and the type of content is crucial (Tiago et al., 2019).

In this context, social media has become popular among DMOs as an effective tool to reach international audiences and divulge information about destinations for travellers and potential visitors (Bernkopf & Nixon, 2019; Llodra-Riera et al., 2015;). Due to the nature of the platforms, the content generated by DMOs in social media, so-called marketer-generated content (MGC), is mainly made up of appealing visuals, namely photos and videos, as well as text (Ghazali & Cai, 2013; Song et al., 2020; Villamediana-Pedrosa et al., 2019;). However, from the resources mentioned above, videos are the most attractive for tourists; thus, destinations with heritage resources should take advantage of their potential to generate visually exciting content that impacts their target audience (Kumar et al., 2022).

Facebook is the most popular social network worldwide, with more than 2.8 billion monthly active users (Statista.com, 2022). Furthermore, it is the third site with the most traffic globally, only behind *Google.com* and *YouTube.com* (Alexa.com, 2022). The increasing popularity of this social networking site has made the platform one of the favourites for DMOs for destination marketing purposes (Munar, 2012, Stankov et al., 2018). Recent studies have revealed an overwhelming adoption of Facebook by DMOs: all DMOs in the European Union have an official Facebook page, same in the USA, where 50 state tourism offices have a presence on Facebook (Stankov et al., 2018).

However, it is crucial to understand how to manage a Facebook page, as malpractices can be more prejudicial than not having a strategy (Stankov et al., 2018). When it comes to posting, special attention should be paid to aspects such as: what to post? (type of content) and when to post? (right time). Studies have revealed that posting frequently does not necessarily lead to better results (higher user engagement), therefore, some DMOs should focus instead on quality (well-planned) than on quantity (Stankov et al., 2018). Moreover, it has been found that the best time for posting is during leisure time: out of working hours, and at weekends (Galvez-Rodriguez et al., 2020). Optimally, posts should also match tourists' interests i.e. weather, be as informative as needed, and transmit positive sentiments (Galvez-Rodriguez et al., 2020). In addition, emotionally-driven posts are more effective than purely informative ones (Molina et al., 2020).

The outbreak of COVID-19 marked a milestone for social media and the way content is shared on these platforms (Pachucki et al., 2022). Social media gained greater relevance during the pandemic times as a means of tourist information, even surpassing the recommendations of friends and relatives, since specialised information i.e. health safety-related issues, is vital for

decision-making (Toubes et al., 2021). Therefore, this event represented for DMOs an opportunity to strengthen their presence on social media to reach potential tourists and maintain direct contact with them without intermediaries (Toubes et al., 2021). Despite these facts, during the COVID-19 pandemic, DMOs lacked a clear strategy for effectively managing Facebook pages (Paniagua Rojano et al., 2021). For instance, a study on the communication strategy used by 16 large urban tourist destinations on Facebook during the first stage of the COVID-19 pandemic revealed a variety of responses from DMOs to the crisis: a) some destinations considerably decreased their presence in the social network, 2) some destinations primarily focused on informing about the pandemic and sanitary measures, and 3) some destinations tried to maintain the normality, with sporadic posts about the pandemic (Paniagua Rojano et al., 2021).

3. METHODOLOGY

In this article, the problem to be elucidated is the type of images that the DMO of Cuenca-Ecuador builds through its publications on its official Facebook page. This study proposes (1) to explore how the DMO is projecting the image of Cuenca-Ecuador through the official Facebook page and (2) to observe the management of the official Facebook page by its DMO. The DMO is an institution that depends on the Municipality of Cuenca, and its mission is to promote tourism in the country and abroad. Cuenca is a city of more than 700.000 inhabitants, "World Heritage Site" since 1999, and has been awarded the "Best Short Vacation Destination in South America" for three consecutive years: 2017, 2018, and 2019 within the framework of the World Travel Awards. In addition, it was recently named a "World Craft City" in 2020 by the World Crafts Council.

The study period of this article is from July 2020 to June 2021, during the pandemic. All the posts from the DMO's official Facebook page (https://www.facebook.com/FundacionTurismoCuenca/) published during this period were examined. The Facebook page was created on August 26, 2015 and has 4,400 subscribers. As a result of a first scrutiny of the page, 537 relevant publications were collected to meet the research objectives. The publications included the following formats: texts, illustrations (photographs, banners, graphics), and videos. Finally, the study reduced the number of publications to 454, discarding 83 publications that corresponded to live interviews with different guests since they do not belong to any of the three formats nor match the focus of the study.

Regarding the analysis of the selected publications, this research assumes the qualitative paradigm since the assumption of a research problem implies a methodological perspective. Content analysis is considered one of the most suitable methods for analyzing the projected image of destinations through content shared on social media (Mak, 2017; Marine-Roig & Ferrer-Rosell, 2018; Önder & Marchiori, 2017; Stepchenkova & Zhan, 2013; Tiago et al., 2019). On the one hand, the analysis was carried out inductively, based on the texts, illustrations (photographs, banners, graphics), and videos of the 454 publications established as relevant: the research team identified the main topics and most frequent themes (Table 1). On the other hand, in a deductive way, the analysis of illustrations and videos posted on the official Facebook page was carried out based on three categories: place, activity, and people (Picazo & Moreno-Gil, 2019). In this case, each publication was considered a unit of analysis and then grouped according to its meaning (Song et al., 2021).

Places: comprises both outdoor and indoor sites of tourist interest. The places can be either architectural or natural i.e churches, parks, museums, public and private buildings, among others.

Activities: refers to the ludic and non-ludic actions that locals or visitors can undertake, outdoor and indoor i.e. festivals, events, craft making, nightlife, among others.

People: corresponds to the real or fictional characters representing locals or visitors (Table 2).

The study constitutes an effort to make sense of a data set through interpretative work (Stepchenkova & Zhan, 2013). Categories of analysis are the result of the findings and the reflection and discussion by the research team during the process (Stepchenkova & Zhan, 2013).

4. RESULTS

Content analysis with an inductive approach shows that posts comprised mainly *news* (40.53% of the total). Within this category, most of the news covered the agenda of the DMO's director, followed by the weekly report on tourism reactivation and the agenda of the Mayor of the city and other departments of the Municipality. It is relevant to mention that the city's mayor designates the DMO's executive board, so there is a possible conflict of interests. However, news about the management and achievements of the DMO's Director and the local Municipality were higher in quantity and frequency than news on tourism topics, which is detrimental to the city's promotion.

As expected, amid the pandemic, news on tourism reactivation and preventive measures for COVID-19 were also popular topics. However, posts on non-touristic news were higher in percentage than other tourism-related news (Table 1).

Regarding posts on the *tourist reactivation* of the city, they represented 32.60% of the total. The DMO informed permanently about the establishments with bio-security certification. This was part of a campaign by the DMO with establishments offering tourist services such as bars, restaurants, hotels, among others, to present the city as a safe place to travel for tourism. Through Facebook posts, the DMO presented a set of protocols for the operation of tourist venues, promoted the vaccination of tourism sector servers, and promoted outdoor activities, which were the first to be activated.

Posts on *cultural tourism* represented only 10.35% of the total. It is particularly significant since the city is a "World Heritage Site" because of its historic centre; therefore it was expected that cultural aspects would prevail in the publications. Overall, posts about popular and traditional festivals, museums, handicrafts, Pre-Columbian and Colonial Past, among others, were not as frequent as expected in the official Facebook page.

Surprisingly, posts on *tourist services* were not representative (9.69% of the total). This category comprised tourist services offered by both the public and private sectors. The few posts focused on mobility and tourist parking, restaurants, drive-in cinema, accommodation services and MICE (Table 1).

Publications on *events* had a marginal percentage of the total posts, only 4.63%. Within this category, events about performing arts were the most published, followed by music-related events. The restrictions implied by the pandemic might explain the minimal percentage of posts about events.

Table 1. Most frequent topics of posts on the DMO's official Facebook page

Category	Subcategory	Frequency	% Partial	% Absolute
News (40.53%)	Agenda of the DMO's Director	63	34.24	13.88
	Weekly report on tourist reactivation	36	19.57	7.93
	Agenda of the City's Mayor and departments of the Municipality	35	19.02	7.71
	Information and preventive measures on the COVID-19	22	11.96	4.85
	Other, non touristic	16	8.70	3.52
	Other, touristic	12	6.52	2.64
Subtotal		**184**	**100**	
Tourist Reactivation: Bio-safe and Sustainable city (32.60%)	Promotion of tourist services to local residents	32	21.62	7.05
	Tourist services with biosafety certification	30	20.27	6.61
	Reactivation of tourist services	27	18.24	5.95
	Reactivation in natural areas	26	17.57	5.73
	Reactivation in cultural spaces	24	16.22	5.29
	Reactivation of Cuenca as a biosafe destination	5	3.38	1.10
	Reactivation of rural tourism	4	2.70	0.88
Subtotal		**148**	**100**	
Cultural Tourism (10.35%)	Popular and traditional festivals	12	25.53	2.64
	Museums	11	23.40	2.42
	Handicraft	10	21.28	2.20
	Pre-Columbian and Colonial Past	6	12.77	1.32
	Cultural Heritage	4	8.51	0.88
	Buildings of architectural value	2	4.26	0.44
	Gastronomy	2	4.26	0.44
Subtotal		**47**	**100**	
Tourist Services (9.69%)	Mobility and tourist parking	20	45.45	4.41
	Restaurants	7	15.91	1.54
	Drive-in cinema	6	13.64	1.32
	Accommodation	6	13.64	1.32
	Meeting Incentives Convention Exhibition, MICE	5	11.36	1.10
Subtotal		**44**	**100**	
Events (4.63%)	Performing arts	10	47.62	2.20
	Electronic music festival	5	23.81	1.10
	Gastronomic festival	3	14.29	0.66
	Concerts City's Symphony Orchestra	2	9.52	0.44
	Music festival	1	4.76	0.22
Subtotal		**21**	**100**	
Nature (2.20%)	Conservation	4	40.00	0.88
	Rivers	2	20.00	0.44
	Wetlands	2	20.00	0.44
	Natural sites of tourist interest	2	20.00	0.44
Subtotal		**10**	**100**	
TOTAL		**454**		**100**

Source: Elaborated by the authors

Similarly, posts on *nature* are very few (2.20% of the total). They referred to conservation topics, rivers, wetlands, and other natural tourist sites of great relevance for the city, but did not receive great attention among the publications (Table 1).
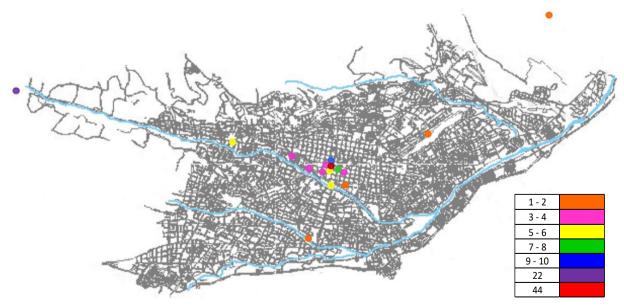
Content analysis with a deductive approach focused on the study of photographs and videos to unveil the projected image of Cuenca through Facebook posts. As displayed in Table 2, findings revealed that most of the photographs posted on the official Facebook page during the studied period showed places of the city (76.07%). Activities were represented in photographs to a lesser extent (23.40%). Interestingly, the representation of people in photographs was marginal (0.53%).

Table 2. Photographs and videos posted on the DMO's official Facebook page

Photographs	%	Videos	%
Places	76.07	Places	59.00
Activities	23.40	Activities	41.00
People	0.53	People	0
Total	100	**Total**	100

Source: Elaborated by the authors

Most places were architectural sites (79.03%) compared with natural sites (20.97%). Photographs exhibited places mainly located in the city centre, central park and surroundings, as shown in the geolocation map (Figure 1). Except by "Cajas National Park" = 22 posts; places of tourist interest located in other areas of the city centre were dismissed in the Facebook posts. Figure 1 shows that the closer the place is to the city center, the highest frequency of posts.

Figure 1. Places of the city most represented in photographs posted on the DMO's official Facebook page

1 - 2	
3 - 4	
5 - 6	
7 - 8	
9 - 10	
22	
44	

Source: Elaborated by the authors

Note**:** Figure 1 shows the distribution of photographs by location and frequency (number of photographs)

A similar trend was observed in videos posted on the official Facebook page: most of the videos showed places of the city (59.00%). In contrast to photographs, activities were highly represented in the posted videos (41.00%). However, people were dismissed in the videos too (Table 2).

Regarding the places shown in the videos, they broadcasted mainly architectural sites (84.75%), while natural sites were scarcely represented in the videos (15.25%).

5. DISCUSSION

5.1 Focus on traditional tourism: places over activities and people

Posts on the DMO's official Facebook page reinforce traditional tourism. Illustrations and videos mainly show places of the city, limited to tourist hot spots, without considering the people's experiences in the attraction. Moreover, posts do not invite tourists to get closer to the residents' daily life and local culture. Posts project the image of a mass tourism destination rather than a city offering a more sustainable and experiential tourism.

The DMO, through its Facebook page, publishes several images of Cuenca-Ecuador, mainly architectural and natural places. The architectural places make up most of the publications, being the "Cathedral Nueva" the most prominent landmark. Although the Cathedral has always been the most promoted image of the city, analysed posts include new trendy places that correspond to heritage buildings restored for different purposes, including tourism. This is the result of an urban development process expressed in the construction of different housing types and the restoration of 20th-century buildings. These places are characterized by their architectural beauty and strategic location, making them the new images projected in the city's promotion.

In Cuenca, a cutting-edge tram that crosses its historic center has been implemented since 2020. This transport system is unique in the country, thus receives great attention in the DMO posts on Facebook. The tram is presented as a new attraction of the city for both residents and tourists, taking advantage of its route through places of tourist interest. Despite this, posts referring to activities visitors can carry out in Cuenca are limited. People, visitors and local population, are left out of the tourism promotion carried out by the DMO. On the contrary, publications that show places are prioritized and ignore the activities that can be done in them and the interaction of visitors with residents.

5.2 Informal management of the official Facebook page

The DMO, through its official Facebook page, shows a multi-image rather than a well-differentiated image of the destination. Consequently, there is no image to be implanted in the mind of the consumer/visitor. In this context, the analysis of the Facebook posts leads us to conclude that the image projected by Cuenca does not achieve originality and attractiveness. Instead, the DMO promotes various images of the city as a collage of places without building a distinctive image. The promotion of Cuenca lacks a particular attraction, a differentiating element, which constitutes a special reason for the visit and helps to build a distinctive image of the city. In this vein, although a destination may create various promotional materials for different segments, these materials should not create more than one image of the city. Promoting a multi-image is not compelling and fails to target specific markets.

The DMO, through Facebook posts, develops advertising for a general audience: a specific target is not distinguished (Jeon et al., 2018). Likewise, the periodicity and frequency of posts

do not show a clear pattern, which suggests some level of improvisation. Posts on the official Facebook page are not made based on a clear and defined strategy. As pointed out, the management of social media demands planning, which on the one hand, avoids posting without a clear objective; and, on the other, consolidates a desired image of the city nationally and globally.

The COVID-19 pandemic showed the importance of social networks as a means of communication, and as a mechanism to give continuity to all types of activity, including tourism (Toubes et al., 2021). Despite the potential of Facebook, it has been used as a mere informative medium by the DMO during the study period. Furthermore, it seems that this resource is not being used with the required readiness, which can produce damage (Stankov et al., 2018). Therefore, the use of Facebook should be more valued since it significantly impacts the image of a destination.

The fact that posts on tourism topics are often relegated to posts on the activities developed by the local authorities demonstrates the dependence of the DMO on the Municipality. DMO's require political independence from the local government. This independence is the basis for developing a long-term institutional policy. Therefore, in this case, the fact that the DMO depends administratively and financially on the Municipality influences the content of Facebook posts.

6. CONCLUSIONS

Facebook is a powerful tool to project a city image and impact on the expectations, motivations and behaviours of visitors and potential visitors. In the case of Cuenca-Ecuador, the official Facebook page of the city promotes a mass tourism by the posting of text, illustrations and videos focusing on places rather than on activities or people -this includes locals and visitors-. Heritage cities should ideally promote through Facebook its local culture and identity. It includes the inhabitants who are an important element of the city. Furthermore, they act as hosts, city experts, and even service providers, and overall have a direct impact on the visitors experience.

From a marketing perspective, Cuenca-Ecuador needs to identify a flagship or landmark that can be promoted through the Facebook official page as a unique selling proposition and differentiate it from competitors. Moreover, the city needs to build and consolidate an image that promotes not only unique experiences but also the preservation and promotion of the cultural heritage.

The importance of Facebook should not be dismissed by DMOs; on the contrary, it requires a professional management. Its management should be based on established strategies that obey to a determined planning. DMOs should invest time and resources in managing the official Facebook page aiming to generate a consistent image, sustainable in the long term. Although the management of a destination image is a continuous process that involves various actors, from both the public and private sector, there is blurred line between the promotion of the destination and the promotion of the local government or private businesses. In short, DMOs should create the official Facebook page with the solely purpose of promoting a tourist destination and provide tourism-related information.

7. PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

Posts on the official Facebook page do not adequately inform potential tourists. The DMO's Facebook page highlights the external appearance of buildings and cultural places but does not describe them or indicate their location. The buildings and places advertised are easy to recognize and locate for the inhabitants of the city, not for tourists. The DMO should consider that the Facebook page project images of Cuenca that can be appreciated anywhere in the world; thus, provided information should be clear and think of the international audience.

In this regard, the posts on the official Facebook page are only in Spanish: it targets only Spanish speakers. However, studies on outbound tourism in Cuenca indicate that tourists come mainly from United States (27.10%); Colombia (9.80%); Germany (7.00%); France (6.30%); Spain (4.20%) and Canada (3.70%) (Avecillas Torres et al., 2021). In this context, posts on the official Facebook page should consider the main markets and publish in English, German and French.

The study evidence demonstrates that international recognitions and achievements are not integrated to strengthen, consolidate and position an image of the city. For instance, the unique characteristics of a World Heritage City are not taken advantage of. Similarly, several posts highlight the city as a World Craft City, however, the only image of handicrafts projected on Facebook is the "toquilla straw hat", despite the many other handicrafts that characterize the city and the iconic places where they are sold.

The DMO presents images of only one of the rivers in Cuenca. However, among the city's distinctive features are the four rivers, which not only constitute a powerful landscape attraction but have determined urban growth and the lifestyle of its inhabitants. In this sense, the rivers and linear parks, that were built taking advantage of their banks, have great potential and could be considered a distinctive element to highlight in the city. In this way, the DMO not only promotes other places than the city centre, but also promotes the encounter between tourists and local residents. Additionally, it helps to reach the desired symbiosis between destination marketing, and urban planning and management (Kavaratzis & Ashworth, 2008).

The fact that the DMO has an official website does not mean that the Facebook posts are of minor importance. The management of the Facebook page demands some level of expertise, not only in the communication aspect but above all, in promotion (Stankov et al., 2018), along with periodic monitoring based on a long-term destination marketing plan (Hysa et al., 2021). The DMO has to project a consistent image of the destination on the different digital platforms and social networking sites.

8. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The present study has some limitations. One of them is the time period of the analysis (July 2020 to June 2021) during the COVID-19 pandemic. On the one hand, the pandemic determined the activities of the DMO, and on the other hand, it was also a determining factor for the content of the Facebook posts. Future studies should consider a longer period of analysis and a post-pandemic context.

Another limitation is that the study focused on the offer side (projected image through Facebook posts). Future research should consider the demand side, that is, the level of engagement of the audience concerning the posts. In addition, it would be interesting to contrast

the image projected through the social networking site, with the image perceived by the audience.

Finally, the study analysed only Facebook, however, the DMO has a presence on other social networking sites such as Twitter, Instagram and, most recently, Tik Tok. In the future, the investigation should consider the image projected through all the social networks used by the DMO.

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