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e-Marketing of Spa Towns of the state of São Paulo, Brazil

e-Marketing das Estâncias Hidrominerais do Estado de São Paulo, Brasil

e-Marketing de los Balnearios Hidrominerales del Estado de São Paulo, Brasil

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Abstract

The tourism industry has been benefited by the Internet through the practice of eCommerce and the creation of websites for promotion of tourist destinations globally, reinforcing the already established idea of eTourism. In this context, the aim of this study was to analyze the Web presence of spa towns in the state of São Paulo, Brazil. Regarding methods and techniques, the research is based on literature review and analysis of websites from the spa towns, from five aspects: type of Web, information content, interactivity, marketing and languages. It may be possible to conclude that an action oriented to eMarketing of tourism destinations does not exist; most pages of cities is linked to the websites of local authorities, the information content is varied to suit different audiences; interactive channels communications are little used, there is no investment in e-Commerce; and advertising in foreign languages is null.
Keywords: eTourism; eMarketing; Destination management; Spa towns; Brazil.

Resumo

A rede internet tem beneficiado a indústria turística por meio da prática do comércio eletrônico e da criação de websites para a promoção de destinos turísticos em nível global, reforçando a ideia já consagrada de e-Tourism. Nesse contexto, o objetivo geral do estudo é analisar a presença na Web das estâncias hidrominerais do Estado de São Paulo, Brasil. No que se refere aos métodos e técnicas, a pesquisa baseia-se em revisão de literatura e na análise das páginas Web das estâncias hidrominerais, a partir de cinco aspectos principais: tipologia de página Web, conteúdo informativo, interatividade, comercialização e idiomas. Entre os resultados, destaca-se que não existe uma ação voltada para o e-Marketing dos destinos turísticos, a maioria das páginas das cidades vincula-se a websites de autoridades locais; o conteúdo informativo é variado visando a atender públicos diferenciados; os canais de comunicação interativos são pouco utilizados; não há investimento em comércio eletrônico; e é nula a divulgação em outros idiomas.

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Palavras-chave: *e-Tourism; e-Marketing; Gestão de destinos; Estâncias hidrominerais; Brasil.*

Resumen

La red Internet ha beneficiado a la industria turística a través de la práctica del comercio electrónico y la creación de sitios Web para la promoción de los destinos turísticos a nivel mundial, lo que refuerza la idea ya establecida de e-Tourism. En este contexto, el objetivo general del estudio es analizar la presencia en la Web de los balnearios hidrominerales del Estado de São Paulo, Brasil. En cuanto a los métodos y técnicas, la investigación se basa en la revisión de la literatura y el análisis de las páginas Web de los balnearios, a partir de cinco aspectos principales: el tipo de Web, contenido de información, interactividad, marketing e idiomas. Entre los resultados, cabe destacar que no hay una acción dirigida a la promoción en la Web de los destinos turísticos, la mayoría de los sitios Web de las ciudades está asociada a las páginas Web de las autoridades locales; el contenido informativo presentado puede servir a diferentes públicos, hay poco uso de los canales interactivos de comunicación, no hay inversión en el comercio electrónico, y es insuficiente la difusión de la información en otros idiomas.
***Palabras clave**: eTourism; eMarketing; Gestión de Destinos; Balnearios hidrominerales; Brasil.*

1. Introduction

As an intense flow media and with an appropriate info-structure to the e-Commerce (Electronic commerce) and to promote touristic destinations, the Internet offers advantages for the tourism industry, especially, due to the intangible characteristic of its product.

The increasing incorporation of information and communication technologies (ICTs) in the trade of goods and services of interest gave rise to the expression e-Tourism (electronic tourism), defined by Buhalis (2003) to refer to the digitalization of all processes and value chains in tourism, to maximize the efficiency and effectiveness of the organizations. The technology enables consumers and businesses to use ICTs to communicate and interact, as well as enhance the various business functions as e-Commerce (electronic commerce), e-Marketing (electronic marketing), e-Finance (electronic finance), e-Planning (electronic planning) and e-Management (electronic management).

ICTs and the Internet are evaluated as competitive instruments for the promotion of tourist destinations, being essential to the elaboration of an e-Marketing plan to consolidate the

brand of a destination. Consequently, the dissemination of targets is one of the main goals of websites and portals, to provide content and resources to satisfy the needs of tourists, in order to go to the destination (DÍAZ LUQUE; GUEVARA PLAZA; ANTÓN CLAVÉ, 2006).

In this sense, ICT and the Internet are widely adopted by management bodies of tourist destinations as Destination Marketing Organizations (OMDs) and Convention and Visitors Bureaus (CVBs), both to promote tourism in urban and rural areas. For instance, the Internet is considered strategic for e-Marketing, due to providing a closer relationship between tourist services providers, market intermediaries and consumers (WTO, 2003). The role of the Internet for the promotion of the tourism sector worldwide is featured with the possibility of the travelers themselves promoting the destinations visited through features and services of the second generation of the Internet graphical interface (World Wide Web), Web 2.0 (O'REILLY, 2005), such as social networks (HUERTAS, 2008).

The rise of the Internet as a promoter of tourist destinations must be observed by the persons responsible for the dissemination of Brazil as a tourist destination, especially internationally, since the country will host the International Football Federation (FIFA) World Cup in 2014 and the Olympics in 2016. Also, there is a concern on the part of the Brazilian Tourism Institute (EMBRATUR), an agency linked to the Ministry of Tourism and responsible for promoting international tourism in the country with the great connectivity that will feature the mega events in the country, given the importance of the Internet as a communication and media promotion as never seen before, as the "Plano Aquarela 2020. Brazil's International Touristic Marketing" (BRAZIL, 2009a). In this scenario, it is also necessary to encourage the dissemination of Brazilian Rural Tourism via Internet, since the country is in fourth position worldwide, surpassed by Spain, Portugal and Argentina (IDESTUR, 2011), but with prospects for growth until 2014.

When considering the potential of the Internet to promote tourist destinations worldwide, we present a survey with the general aim of investigating the e-Marketing practices of the spa towns of the state of São Paulo offices, Brazil, which will also be the headquarters of FIFA World Cup 2014. Sixty-seven cities are managed by the Association of the Spa City Halls in the state of São Paulo (Aprecesp, Associação das Prefeituras das Cidades Estância do Estado de São Paulo), which are classified as climate, healthy and touristic resorts. Besides,

some Spa towns are official candidates to be Training Centers for FIFA World Cup, with the possibility of hosting teams as sub-headquarters of the mega event.

This research will evaluate the promotion level of the spa towns in São Paulo on the Internet, aiming at understanding the relation between tourism in the countryside and ICTs. The study is based on literature review and analysis of the official tourism Web pages of the eleven cities classified as spa towns of São Paulo, with emphasis on five aspects: Web typology, informational content, interactive communication, marketing and languages; from accounting for elements (counting methods).

2. Relationship between Tourism and ICTs

Authors Cooper et al. (2007) argue that the rapid growth in the volume of travelers in 1990 and the demand for sophisticated, specialized and qualified products has driven the need to adopt ICTs in tourism. After all, the Internet offers transparent and easily comparable information on destinations, vacation packages, ticket, lodging, gastronomy and leisure services, as well as displays the availability and the updated value of the rates.

> Consumers using increasingly commercial and non-commercial sites on the Internet for research, planning, booking, buying and adding their touristic products. They can also get instant confirmation and travel documents quickly, making last-minute reservations (COOPER et al., 2007, p. 683).

The development of ICTs and especially of the Internet raises the empowerment of the new tourist, who becomes increasingly knowledgeable and able to evaluate money and time invested in an exceptional way. The independent tourist is less interested in following the crowd in tour packages, which are losing market share as a result of the advance of independent organized tourism model , facilitated by packaging dynamics, i.e. the possibility of a person to set up his/her own travel package (BUHALIS; LAW, 2008).

It is worth mentioning that the Internet strengthens itself as a media that promotes social interaction backed by Web 2.0 resources and services, which aim to offer rich experiences to users by facilitating the process of editing and publishing content to expand the collaboration

and interaction, a foremost communicative action that defines the Web 2.0 (O'REILLY, 2005). Besides the traditional *websites* and sales portals for tourism-related products, Web 2.0 stimulates the participation in social media, so the Internet user is able to create *blogs*, *photologs*, edit their own videos and run through virtual reality scenarios designed for the ones interested in travel and tourism themes.

The Web 2.0 appears as a natural evolution of the Web template designed by Tim Berners-Lee in late 1990's, the Web 1.0 then identified by the pages with static content, and little or no interaction with the user. Therefore, the Web 2.0 is an ally to promoting tourism worldwide; especially since anyone can disclose positively or negatively experienced products and services in the destinations visited through social networks, for example.

Buhalis and Law (2008) also admit that on-line groups are gradually consolidating as channel of influence in decision making concerning tourism, once consumers rely more on themselves than in marketing messages. The arising of Web 2.0 and, therefore, the Travel 2.0 is linked directly to the concept of social network that is widely applied to tourism at present. This line of thinking will meet the ideas of Huertas (2008, p. 3, our translation), to argue that:

> The opinions and experiences of other consumers are a very valuable source of information for potential tourists, since they help to reduce the sense of risk and unawareness about the tourist services. [...] The experiences and the positive reports from other users, as well as the way these experiences are described, with exciting comments and photos can motivate and convince more than mere information or a tourist brochure.

From the point of view of Cooper et al. (2007, p. 685-686), the World Wide Web offers a globally articulated and low cost infrastructure for the multimedia information, promotion and distribution of tourism: "This has made it possible to provision and trade products tailored to meet the needs of individual tourists and, therefore, joined the demand and the offer in a flexible and interactive manner." As O'Connor (2001) indicates, tourists need information before going on a trip, thus, disclosing qualified content is useful to plan and make decisions. The whole process of searching for information revolves around the main feature

of the tourist product: intangibility, which eliminates any possibility of the tourists knowing exactly what they will find in the much-anticipated and scheduled trip.

3. Promoting Destinations and *Websites Analyses*

Generally speaking, the OMDs and CVBs are known as the bodies responsible for the promotion of tourist destinations, to such an extent that one of the terms is always used depending on the authors and the geographical areas. In the definition of Gartrell (1994), the OMDs are organizations established to promote specific destinations among potential travelers. To Buhalis (2000), they are entities to promote tourism and attract tourists to develop the local economy and improve the image of a given geographical area, working in conjunction with other agents of the tourism industry. The OMDs can be independent bodies; however, they are usually linked to public administrations at different levels: local, regional or national.

On the other hand, the notion of CVBs refers to a small or medium-sized non-profit organization, which performs a number of information and communication activities to facilitate the development and promotion of tourism in certain geographical areas (YUAN; GRETZEL; FESENMAIER, 2003). Therefore, its primary mission is to attract visitors to the region with the aim of improving the economy and the image of the area through the coordination of the components of the tourism industry (GRETZEL et al., 2006). Most CVBs are independent and non-profit organizations; some are part of the government of a town or region, or of the chamber of commerce, while others have special legal representations that turn them into authorities in the subject (YUAN; GRETZEL; FESENMAIER, 2003). Currently, according to Buhalis (1998; 2000) and Gretzel et al. (2006), regardless of the type of body responsible for the promotion of tourist destinations, all of them consider the Internet the first means of communication to establish contact with potential tourists.

Particularly in Brazil, the public sector has been active in the marketing of tourist destinations through local authorities of governmental character, either in the local, state or federal instances, and the international dissemination of the image of the country at the federal level

is the responsibility of EMBRATUR. In the specific case of the spa towns in the state of São Paulo, all are represented by a private non-profit entity, Aprecesp, created in 1985 with the aim of representing the interests and working for the tourist development of the spa towns on the coast and countryside of the state of São Paulo. Today it brings together 67 offices which are considered so by fulfilling certain prerequisites set by a state law, being classified as: health, climate, spa and seaside tourism (APRECESP, 2013, on-line).

However, the promotion of destinations through governmental authorities becomes a limiting factor to the marketing of products and services. As Cooper et al. (2007) warn, the public sector marketing organizations rarely close a sale because they act as instruments to attract consumers to the point of sale, usually represented by a private sector company. So in some situations it is difficult to assess the effectiveness of target marketing with regard to the commercial aspect. Ideally, the product attributes that will appeal to different segments of tourists should be identified in the destinations, to ensure that the promotional campaign has a coherent message (COOPER et al., 2007).

Despite the importance of the Internet as a media promoting tourism, there is a deficiency regarding the e-Marketing aimed at rural tourism establishments, according to a survey of Spanish Rural Tourism Observatory, linked to the University of Barcelona, and by Netquest, an on-line research company, which has determined that the lack of knowledge about on-line tools affects the competitiveness among the rural owners. The study, with more than 2,000 owners and 10,000 travelers, revealed that most employers are aware of the importance of the views of users on-line, but only 68% manage that information; others do not do it because of a lack of knowledge (HOSTELTUR, 2013, on-line).

In this sense, the proposal to observe the relationship of ICTs with tourist activities in rural areas in the country to investigate effectively the eMarketing practices of the spa towns in the state of São Paulo, the 11 cities classified as health resorts were selected as the object of study (Figure 1).

Figure 1 – Spa towns of the state of São Paulo

Source: http://www.turpaulista.com.br/

It is worth noting that the concept of Rural Tourism of the Ministry of Tourism is adopted in this research, being defined as "...the set of tourist activities developed in the countryside, committed to agricultural production, adding value to products and services, rescuing and promoting the cultural and natural heritage of the community" (IDESTUR, 2011, p. 8).

Regarding studies focused on analyses of Brazilian tourist destinations websites, the researches of Guisi (2005), Tomikawa (2009), Farias et al. (2011) and Díaz Luque and Corrêa (2012) are highlighted. Guisi (2005) assessed the Brazilian tourism site configurations through a multitude of methodological approaches (exploratory, descriptive study and diagnosis with application of questionnaires), aiming at identifying characteristics based on the concepts of internal and external atmosphere, hospitality and virtual tourism. Tomikawa (2009) conducted a descriptive study to search for official tourism websites for 27 Brazilian states, with emphasis on seven aspects: findability, Web resources, identity and reliability, marketing, content, interactivity, and public policy.

The work of Farias et al. (2011) had the objective of analyzing how the tourist portal of a destination could influence the valuation of its image. The research was exploratory and with a descriptive character, from the analysis of six appraisers on the portals of interest of São Paulo (www.cidadedesaopaulo.com), Rio de Janeiro (www.rioguiaoficial.com.br) and Rio Grande do Sul (www.turismo.rs.gov.br). Then a poll with 111 people was made to measure the target image before and after visiting the sites. Finally, it mentions the research of Díaz Luque and Corrêa (2012) held to analyze the state of the official tourism websites of the twelve cities tht would be the headquarters of the World Cup 2014 with a focus on five aspects: Web typology, informational content, interactivity, marketing and languages; from the accounting for elements (counting methods). They are all pioneering studies that contribute to the development of this area of research in the national territory.

4. Methods and Techniques

The study was developed from the analysis of the official tourism Web pages of the eleven offices classified as spa towns in the state of São Paulo, Brazil (Chart 1). The analysis was performed in January 2013 and emphasized five main characteristics: Web type, informational content, interactive communication, marketing, and languages (Chart 2). The method and techniques presented are based on accounting for elements (counting methods) defined in categories, by an adaptation of the work of Díaz Luque and Corrêa (2012), which examined the websites of cities that would be the headquarters of FIFA World Cup in 2014 in Brazil.

In the first category, Web typology, the type of Web page was assessed involving five possibilities: Web and exclusive domain of tourism, exclusive tourism Web domain with extension of domain from the local authority, local authority Web with exclusive space for tourism, local authority Web with sparse touristic information, and finally, local authority Web without touristic information.

The second category of elements referred to the informational content available on the Web page, which is subdivided in four aspects with elements to be accounted for: information on geographical condition (location of the destination through a map / climate and time), accesses

to reach the destination, tourist information of the attractions and rides at the destination, and finally, details on five business activities directly related to tourism.

SPA TOWNS	WEBSITES
1. Águas da Prata	http://www.aguasdaprata.sp.gov.br/website/index.php/turismo.html
2. Águas de Lindóia	http://www.aguasdelindoia.sp.gov.br/site/
3. Águas de Santa Bárbara	http://www.aguasdesantabarbara.sp.gov.br/novo_site/index.php
4. Águas de São Pedro	http://www.aguasdesaopedro.sp.gov.br/portal/
5. Amparo	http://www.amparo.sp.gov.br/2011/node/17
6. Ibirá	http://www.ibira.sp.gov.br/2012/Conteudo.aspx?ID=36
7. Lindóia	http://www.lindoia.sp.gov.br/portaldoturismo.asp
8. Monte Alegre do Sul	http://www.montealegredosul.sp.gov.br/
9. Poá	http://www.poa.sp.gov.br/index.php
10. Serra Negra	http://intra.serranegra.sp.gov.br/?q=node/2
11. Socorro	http://www.socorro.sp.gov.br/default.asp

Box 1 – List of Web pages of the Spa towns

Source: Proprietary survey

CATEGORIES	SUBCATEGORIES	ELEMENTS
Web Type		Exclusive tourism Web and domain / Exclusive tourism web with domain extension from local authority / Web from local authority with exclusive space for tourism / Web from local authority with sparse touristic information / Web from local authority without touristic information.
Information Content	Geographical Condition	Location Map / Weather and climate.
	How to get there / Accesses to the destinations (air, land and sea)	Local or nearby airports / highways / ports
	Touristic information	Nature / Special Places to Visit / Monuments and architecture / Museums / Cultural agenda / History / Traditional festivals / Shopping areas and markets / Destinations near / Transport in the destination / Destination map / Touristic circuits, trails and routes / Accessible tourism (tourist information for disabled persons) / Specific tourism (gay, family, events, business etc.) / World Cup / Useful Services.
	Information on tourism companies	Lodging facilities / Restaurants and Bars / Tourist guides, bus and train / Travel agencies / Car rental companies.
Interactivity		OMD contact telephone / Physical address / E-mail / On-line Contact Form / Forum / Twitter / Facebook / Orkut / YouTube / Flickr / blog / RSS Feeds.
Commerce		Analysis of marketing levels: without lodging information / with contact and lodging information / Hotel associations Web links / Booking system Web links / external embedded booking system (outsourced) / proprietary embedded booking system.
Languages		Valuation of the languages in which the websites provide versions: English, Spanish, French, Italian and others.

Chart 2 – List of subcategories for analysis

Source: Adapted from Díaz Luque and Corrêa (2012)

The third category investigated the marketing levels of the Web pages. In this case, the idea was to record the Web pages that offered some level of distribution through the on-line booking system to facilitate travel planning by the Internet users. To this end, six sub levels were determined: without lodging information, with lodging information and contact, Web links to hotel associations, Web links to booking system, external booking system embedded to the Web page, however, managed by a third party, and proprietary booking system embedded.

The fourth category was related to aspects of interactivity, when considering the resources and services used to establish interactive communication between the OMD and the potential tourist, going through traditional communication channels, such as telephone contact until the adoption of a number of resources available on-line, such as: email address, contact form, forums, and social networks (Twitter, Facebook, Orkut), video-sharing sites (YouTube, Flickr), blogs and services to update and add content, like RSS Feeds, the latter ones representatives of Web 2.0, which stimulates the participation of Internet users through editing and publishing material on the Internet.

As a last category, we identified the Web pages in alternative languages than the ones spoken in the region; when the major foreign languages offered on the websites or in touristic contents were accounted for.

5. Analyses of the Spa Towns *Websites*

Next, the results of the analyses relating to five categories and their respective elements observed in this study will be presented.

5.1. Web Typology

The existence of a Web page dedicated exclusively to tourism allows gathering all the promotional efforts regarding the industry. Furthermore, it can facilitate the access to potential tourists with the indication of several quality and useful information on a single communication media; in order to highlight the proprietary content of local institutions for citizens in general.

However, the assessments regarding the Web page type used to promote tourism in spa towns of the state of São Paulo, in Brazil, were not very positive. Of the eleven places evaluated,

only the city of Lindóia presented an exclusive tourism-related Web with a domain extension from the local authority (9.1%). On the other hand, 63.6% the websites were linked to the local authority's Web pages with sparse touristic information.

Only 18.2% of the websites were Web pages from the local authority with exclusive space for tourism (Águas da Prata and Amparo). On the other hand, the town of Poá (9.1%) stood out negatively because there was no information section on tourism at the local authority website.

5.2. Information Content

The second category of elements concerns the informational content available on every website, with emphasis on four aspects: geographical condition (location / climate and time), how to get there / accesses to the destination, tourist information of the attractions and tours, and information about tourism companies. A data set evaluated as essential to promote a destination on the Internet regardless of the structure of the agency responsible, once the Internet is considered to be the primary means of communication to establish contact with tourists today (1998; 2000, BUHALIS; GRETZEL et al. 2006).

Concerning the geographical condition, 63.6% websites observed recorded the location of touristic destination through maps of the state and the region. It is a kind of essential information for tourists because it can help to get an idea of location in a country of continental dimensions such as Brazil. Regarding the aspects of climate and time, 72.7% of the Web pages had that data, also useful to help prepare for the trip.

On how to get there / accesses to the destination, in which information on airports, highways and ports were considered, 81.8% of the websites reviewed indicated the land routes from the main highways of access to the cities. However, information regarding airplane access (airports) and maritime transport (ports) was not found.

As for tourist information of the attractions of the destination, there are a variety of nature-related content with 81.8%, as well as special places to visit are indicated, with the index of 90.9% of presence in the *websites* evaluated. Tips on monuments and architecture combine 54.5% of the records, while museums were mentioned by 45.5% of the Web pages.

Concerning information about cultural agenda, 63.6% of the Web pages mentioned that data. On the other hand, content about the history of cities and traditional festivals (Carnival, festivals and fairs) were presented respectively by 72.7% and 45.5%. The approaches on shopping areas and markets have been indicated by 54.5% of the *websites* visited.

Regarding destinations nearby, 36.3% of the Web pages analyzed presented tips about touristic places to get to know in the neighborhood. However, there was a low level of information on the possibilities of transportation in touristic destination, being quoted by a single website (9.1%) of the spa town of Amparo. Similarly, the destination map resource record was found in only 27.2% of the Web pages (Águas de São Pedro, Amparo, and Socorro). Now, information about routes, trails and tours were present in 54.5% of the Web sites.

Regarding the focus on tourism segments, 81.8% of the *websites* emphasized some specific approach with emphasis on agro-tourism / rural tourism, ecotourism / ecological, health, therapeutic and aesthetic, fishing, adventure / sports and leisure, events, shopping, and religious tourism. The spa towns of Águas de São Pedro, Lindóia and Socorro are among those that offer more options for tourism segments. As a negative index, the spa towns of Monte Alegre do Sul and Poá do not indicate any specific tourism option, although they are classified as spa towns.

Concerning reports of accessible tourism, which requires attention to specific aspects of their facilities, equipment and operational procedures to meet a distinguished audience consisting of people with disabilities or reduced mobility (Brazil, 2009b), there was only one Web page registered focusing on the theme, which belonged to the city of Socorro (9.1%).

Regarding information about tourist companies, 81.8% of the *websites* indicated means of lodging and 63.6% brought suggestions of restaurants and bars. In turn, 27.2% mentioned the possibilities of guided tours via bus or train. From the total of eleven *websites* of spa towns, only 27.2% had information about travel agencies and a very small portion of 9.1% indicated the services of car rental companies.

Information pertaining to useful services or utilities with names, addresses and phone numbers of pharmacies, hospitals, garages, police station, bank branches, etc. were highlighted in 27.2% of the pages of the cities (Amparo, Monte Alegre do Sul and Socorro). This is a

required content to assist tourists in case of emergency during the trip, being given little importance in the official websites of the spa towns.

5.3. Interactivity

As for the potential of interactivity exploited by the cities classified as spa towns of São Paulo, Brazil, interactive communication channels made available to tourists were investigated, as phone number, physical and electronic addresses, on-line contact form, forum, social networks, video-sharing sites, blogs and services to update and add content, such as RSS Feeds. It is worth mentioning that most of these features and services is representative of the second generation of the graphical interface of the Internet, Web 2.0, which encourages the participation of the common Internet user with simplified processes of editing and publishing content on the Internet (O'REILLY, 2005).

At first, we evaluated the personal communication channels, such as OMD contact telephone (63.6%), physical (36.3%), and electronic (54.5%) addresses, and on-line contact form (18.2%). In that sense, there was a preference for traditional forms of contact such as phone and email. As it can be noticed, the use of on-line forms to make contact with the potential tourist is low, being adopted solely by the websites of spa towns of Águas de São Pedro and Lindóia.

On the other hand, regarding the existence of collective use communication channels, such as forums and blogs, none of the analyzed Web pages would adopt such resources. In the case of the use of RSS Feeds for news updates on the display the tourism sector in the Web sites studied, only the city of Amparo (9.1%) brought this feature, as well as a Delicious social network account (9.1%), which allows the user to organize his/her favorite websites and share them with anyone. Concerning the creation of profiles on social networks to communicate with tourists, there was the record of a single Web page of the spa town of Lindóia (9.1%) which featured a profile on Twitter microblog (Figure 2).

Figure 2 – Lindóia profile on Twitter

Source: https://twitter.com/turlindoia

Regarding the use of Internet sharing capabilities, the fact that the touristic destinations websites analyzed did not make videos available on Web sites like YouTube or pictures on the specialized site Flickr were points of attention. When the pages from the destination display pictures of touristic points or events, they do so through photo galleries, being that the images are not always accompanied by subtitles to make tourists aware. It is undoubtedly a very low number of resources and services usage that could contribute to the dissemination of the spa towns tourist destinations on the Internet, for example, when portraying the diversity of those eleven cities through images and sounds in videos, with their natural landscapes and historical and cultural features. On the other hand, the use of social networks, blogs and video-sharing sites as part of the eMarketing could stimulate the participation of Internet users to promote the destinations visited (BUHALIS; LAW, 2008; HUERTAS, 2008).

5.4. Commerce

It is a fact that the advance of ICTs and the Internet have brought benefits to the companies and organizations from the tourism industry, especially with the introduction of e-Commerce

and e-Marketing practices, just to name a few of the changes brought with the e-Tourism, according to Buhalis (2003). In that case, it would be ideal if every website of tourist destination could offer the possibility of booking a lodging means, to facilitate the travel plans of the independent Internet user.

However, in Brazil, the responsibility for the promotion of touristic destinations is in charge of public bodies which do not have authorization to market products and services. It is a reality that clearly limits the advance of electronic commerce, as observed by analyzing the Web pages of the spa towns.

Therefore, as registered by Cooper et al. (2007), given the inexpressive role of public bodies regarding the commercial aspect, as in the case of spa towns linked to the state of São Paulo government, whose structure does not permit the marketing of products and services of interest, none of the websites offered a booking system or electronic payment for lodging. Most of the Web pages were restricted to offering information about the means of lodging at the destinations (81.8%). In turn, a single website (9.1%) of the spa town of Serra Negra indicated links to hotel associations. On the other hand, in one webpage (9.1%) of the city of Poá there was no suggestion of a place to stay overnight in the city.

5.5 Languages

The Internet also drives the promotion of tourist destinations in international markets. For that end, there is a need to disseminate information in foreign languages according to the target tourist audience you want to attract. However, 90.9% of the Web pages searched did not present versions of the websites in different languages than the Portuguese, and not even the publication of any material in other languages. Only the Web page of the spa town of Socorro (9.1%) stood out by presenting a part of the website in the English language. Consequently, the international scope of the tourists through eMarketing for the spa towns of São Paulo becomes cumbersome and limited.

6. Final Considerations

Based on the analyses of the official tourism Web pages of the spa towns of the state of São Paulo, Brazil, to understand the relation between rural tourism, information, and communication technologies, we found that there is still no effective action geared for the e-Marketing of these touristic destinations. Of the total of spa towns surveyed, only the cities of Águas de São Pedro, Lindóia and Socorro presented a set of information capable of attracting tourists, although many aspects of the content need to be reviewed.

It is worth emphasizing that from the eleven spa towns, 63.6% of the websites were linked to local authority Web pages with sparse touristic information, and 18.2% of the websites were linked to local authority Web pages with exclusive space for tourism (Amparo and Lindóia), although it is not the ideal condition, all disclosure initiative is seen as positive by helping to promote tourist destinations on the Internet. Also regarding the Web type, the city of Lindóia is the only one that presented an exclusive Web domain extension from the local authority (9.1%). On the other end, the city of Poá was the negative highlight by not offering information on tourism in the official website, which demonstrates a lack of vision about the potential of the Internet by the agency responsible for the promotion of the destination.

In general, the assessment of the informational content can be considered as above average, for example, most websites presented data on geographical conditions (location map / weather and time) and ways of how to get from the main highways of access to the cities.

As to information on attractive spots and tourism companies at the destination, there are several contents with the possibility of meeting publics with various interests. There is also a special attention to certain areas such as rural tourism, ecotourism and health, therapeutic to aesthetic treatments. On the other hand, we did not find any material concerning FIFA World Cup 2014, although some cities classified as spa towns are official candidates for Training Center for the World Cup, and can host teams as sub-headquarters of the sports mega-event of 2014.

Regarding the interactive communication channels offered, there are few options for interaction with tourists, using the traditional forms of contact such as phone and email predominantly. The use of social networks such as Twitter, and video-sharing sites like YouTube

and Flickr, is virtually expressionless. However, the biggest deficiency in the e-Marketing of cities is the disclosure of material in foreign languages, with a single Web page of the spa town of Socorro with a version of its website in English.

Finally, on the issue of marketing, it was observed that the e-commerce is not the central concern of the Web pages of the spa towns, especially when observing the natural limitation of the government agencies that administer and promote such tourist destinations. Thus, most websites only provide information on the means of lodging (81.8%), and one Web page of the city of Poá (9.1%) has not presented any information on places to lodge. Anyway, it is worth registering that the absence of booking systems hinders the purchase process of the independent tourist, who will tend to choose a destination that facilitates planning the trip on-line. In this sense, for Brazil to benefit from sports mega events in the coming years, the investment and the implementation of projects aimed at promoting destinations via the Internet to attract domestic and foreign tourists are required.

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