

SOS to my followers! The role of marketing communications in reinforcing online travel community value during times of crisis

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ABSTRACT

The context faced by online travel agencies (OTAs) during the pandemic is nothing short of dramatic. During the state of emergency, marketing communications have proven essential to maintain emotional ties with online communities even though sales have plummeted to zero. This study analyses the social network communication strategy during the worst days of the crisis of two OTAs specialized in selling flights and in distributing activities, excursions, and guided tours at the world's top tourist destinations. This qualitative study, based on the observation of online activity and personal interviews with marketing managers, shows how to respond to a crisis, maintain brand identity and strengthen the support of the online community. With the help of the community and co-creation processes, the sector has been able to reinvent itself and new services have emerged. From selling flights, one of the studied OTAs has now changed to planning trips around the regions.

1. Introduction

According to Statista (2020), the travel agency industry over the last decade might be declared as having been the era of travel agents, as a result of the latter having experienced enormous growth in terms of sales, revenue, and profits. This growth was principally due to online travel agencies (OTAs), which grew at twice the rate of the direct channel (Turner & Mansour, 2018). Some OTAs allow customers to hire a combination of services, such as hotels, flights, travel packages, activities, and car rentals (Expedia, Booking, or Ctrip), while others specialise in a single travel service such as hotel bookings (Hotels.com, LateRooms.com) or booking experiences and activities that can be enjoyed at the chosen destination (Getyourguide).

The growth and consolidation of online travel intermediaries was cut short by the health crisis triggered by the Covid-19 pandemic, which has had a substantial impact on global economic, political, and socio-cultural systems, and particularly, on global travel, tourism, and leisure (Sigala, 2020). As a consequence of the virus, countries imposed travel restrictions that have impacted all kinds of tourism industry activities and all parts of the hospitality value chain (Gössling, Scott, & Hall, 2021): airlines and other forms of transport were forced to drastically reduce their activity (particularly those operating at an international level), hotels and restaurants have closed (some restaurants have been relying exclusively on delivery services), while leisure and

entertainment activities came to a virtual standstill. For Wang and Su (2020), the effects of the pandemic on tourism are due to three specific reasons: official travel restrictions, event cancellations, and travellers' fear of the risk. Gössling et al. (2021) describe this scenario as moving from overtourism to non-tourism.

In what is such a catastrophic situation for the tourist sector, firms involved in the industry as a whole, and OTAs in particular, were forced in a matter of weeks to face up to this situation and to even refocus their business given the uncertainty surrounding how the sector will evolve (Zenker & Kock, 2020). Firms had to respond to the immediate needs of their clients (refunds, cancellations), their staff (temporary redundancy plans involving staff being furloughed) or society at large (for instance, transport companies or vehicle rental services who put their fleets at the disposal of health workers or members of the security forces, or hotel chains who gave over their facilities to health workers or patients, to cite just a few examples).

Together with this urgent and immediate response, another challenge facing firms involved maintaining communication with their clients, particularly through social networks and online communities. With the onset of the crisis, social networks have enabled organizations to keep in touch with their clients. Indeed, the use of these online spaces has risen since the coronavirus outbreak (Statista, 2020; Techcrunch, 2020).

As a result, and faced with the restrictions on mobility and the

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lockdown measures imposed, the online communities of OTAs needed to be maintained by adding value. Yet this is easier said than done: how social networks should be used during the Covid-19 crisis has proven (and is proving) to be an issue that has aroused interest in a practical sense (eMarketer, 2020; Socialbakers, 2020), and is of undoubted appeal to scholars, since crisis and crisis management continues to be a topic of interest amongst academics and one which still involves a number of questions that need to be explored (Bundy, Pfarrer, Short, & Coombs, 2017), particularly in the face of such an unprecedented crisis as the one currently gripping the world. Specifically, with regard to digital media or social networks as platforms for promoting online communities new challenges have emerged: how can emotional ties with the community be strengthened when sales have plummeted to zero and the future looks uncertain? How can one talk of travel at a time when there is widespread dismay and when society is immersed in the bemusement and pain caused by the effects of the virus?

The future is still one of enormous uncertainty. Many firms are still in the dark as to what the real impact on their business will be, although they live in hope of getting “back to normal”. What is true is that the future of the sector will not only depend on how the restrictions imposed by the health crisis evolve but also on changes in consumer behaviour and travel demand (because of personal economic wellbeing and the perceived health risk) and on businesses’ financial capacity to withstand the crisis. There will be a clear need to redefine certain businesses so that they can continue to generate sustainable value for their clients and survive this crisis. This is where questions concerning communication come to the fore: How should communication with the online community be managed in times of crisis? Is it possible to maintain the activity in social networks when the future of the business is uncertain? Can social networks serve as a forum to spawn ideas that can help businesses to redefine themselves?

In this context of crisis for the tourism and hospitality industry, this work seeks to unearth the keys to efficient communication in social networks that will provide value to the community of followers while also obviously giving value to the firm. To explore the communication strategy of OTAs during the pandemic and the value for online communities, this work employs a qualitative study of two cases of OTAs specialized in selling flights and cultural activities. They are suitable cases because both are supported by a large number of social media followers and because the communication strategy was adapted during the darkest days of the crisis. The research method is based on the observation of online activity together with personal interviews conducted with the marketing managers.

2. Background: social media communities and communication in the tourism industry

2.1. Social media and online communities in tourism

Curiously, a few years ago some disadvantages of online travel intermediation were the lack of human context during the transaction or the volatile customer base (Buhalis & Licata, 2002). Nowadays, the situation has changed and there is greater interaction with the client. Marketing methods have evolved over the last few years, with many more travel agents using social media and user-generated reviews as a marketing tool. Indeed, the use of social media in tourism and in the hospitality industry is growing. According to SocialToaster (2019), 1,000,000 travel-related hashtags are searched for every week, 74% of travellers state they use social media while travelling, and 75% of travel followers will engage with their friends’ travel posts, amongst other results.

The potential of social media as a communication tool in the tourism industry has been evidenced and highlighted by several authors (Cabiddu, Carlo, & Piccoli, 2014; Casalo, Flavián, & Guinalfú, 2011; Clarke, Murphy, & Adler, 2016; Kim, Jun, Walker, & Drane, 2015; Neirotti, Raguseo, & Paolucci, 2016; Xiang & Gretzel, 2010; Zeng & Gerritsen,

2014). Leung, Law, Van Hoof, and Buhalis (2013) examine the literature in tourism and the hospitality industry that highlights the important role of social media in both travellers’ decision-making as well as in tourism operations and management. From the consumer perspective, several studies have stressed the role played by social media at different stages of the travellers’ travel plan process. Trustworthiness of information on social media is positively recognized and travellers have accepted social media as a new communication channel, in which to communicate, collaborate, and cooperate (Casalo et al., 2011; Xiang & Gretzel, 2010; Xiang, Magnini, & Fesenmaier, 2015). Previous research has also shown the potential of social media in enhancing brand awareness, customer engagement, and customer loyalty (Almeida-Santana & Moreno-Gil, 2017; Leung et al., 2013). For their part, supplier-related studies have concentrated on social media applications in promotion, product distribution, communication, management, and research functions.

In addition to being a powerful communication tool, social media are an extremely valuable tool for managing relations with clients as well as for creating and maintaining a brand-based community, thereby offering enormous potential to develop communities, interact with them and engage followers in creating and disseminating information. Therefore, social media act as platforms to build online brand communities; namely social media-based brand communities (Laroche, Habibi, Richard, & Sankaranarayanan, 2012). Users obtain information, entertainment, and economic benefits (Gummerus, Liljander, Weman, & Pihlström, 2012), but also social and emotional value (connectivity, integration, identification) by being a member of social media brand communities (Carlson, Wyllie, Rahman, & Voola, 2019). Several authors have studied individuals’ interest in engaging in social media (Hollebeek, Glynn, & Brodie, 2014) and their reasons for participating and interacting in firm-hosted commercial online communities, such as commitment to the community, online interaction propensity (Wiertz & de Ruyter, 2007) or identification (Kang & Schuett, 2013). Moreover, online communities based on social media have proven to be useful tools to encourage branding co-creation with customers (Hajli, Shanmugam, Papagiannidis, Zahay, & Richard, 2017) and have emerged as a source of new ideas and user-generated content. In the tourism context, the potential of social media to build brand communities and to engage individuals with tourism brands and with destinations has also been evidenced (Cheung, Ting, Cheah, & Sharipudin, 2020; Harrigan, Evers, Miles, & Daly, 2017). Cheung et al. (2020) suggest that social media brand communities allow tourists’ emotions to be expressed and the intention to co-create value for a tourist destination to be fostered.

2.2. Communication in social media in times of crisis

Considering social media as a communication tool as well as a platform for building online communities and engaging customers, brand communication in social media is defined by Voorveld (2019), following the proposal of Alhabash, Mundel, and Hussain (2017), as “any piece of brand-related communication distributed via social media that enables internet users to access, share, engage with, add to, and co-create”. Voorveld (2019) reviewed the main challenges facing brand communication in social media and indicated that future content would be more organic, more social, and less commercial. These predictions have turned out to be accurate since the beginning of the Covid-19 crisis. Indeed, high-quality and social content becomes the cornerstone of brand social media communication in times of crisis. Stieglitz et al. (2017) explain that in a crisis environment, individuals try to reduce uncertainty and ambiguity by sharing and interpreting information collectively, i.e., collective sensemaking. In this regard, social networks enable the information gap left by other communication channels to be filled.

Since the beginning of the health and economic crisis, OTAs have had to decide which brand communication content to maintain in order to endow their social media communities with value. The extraordinary context brought about by Covid-19 demands an even closer look be

taken at the value of social networks for the client and for the firm as well as an analysis of which elements prove key to securing the support of the social media community during times of crisis. Although the on-line medium enables the limitations of physical contact to be overcome, failure to actually post any activity or tourist product might lead to some organizations losing their focus. Nevertheless, people are still there: they are not travelling but they do have other specific needs that must be satisfied. Moreover, there are still the emotional ties that bind people to one another and that bind people to brands. Therefore, we put forward the following research questions:

- (1) How can OTAs maintain the support of social media online communities through communication even if sales have dropped to zero?
- (2) How does OTAs' communication in social media evolve throughout the crisis?



- (3) Can online communities help OTAs to re-focus their activities?

3. Methodology

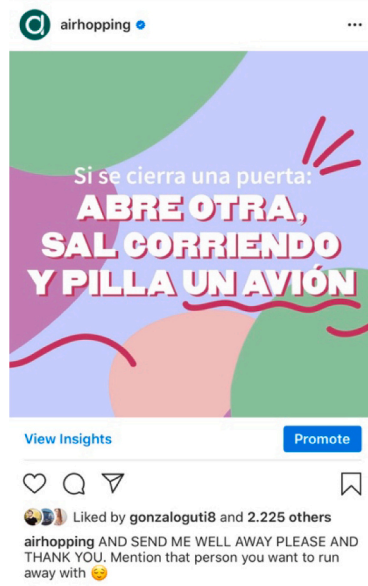
3.1. Research method

This research has employed a qualitative case study approach to analyse the key features of the communication strategy of tourism and hospitality firms on social media during the most difficult periods of the Covid-19 crisis. This research tool is adequate when the objective is exploratory, and when it focuses more on understanding rather than on verification. Case studies allow contemporary phenomena to be described and examined and provides insights into the interaction between the various parts involved in a system (Merriam, 1988; Yin, 2014). Moreover, just a few cases are sufficient to serve as a suitable starting point for in-depth investigation and description (Eisenhardt,

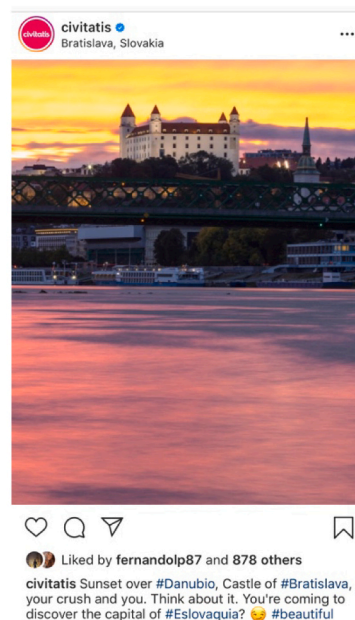
Table 1
Description of the cases.

		
Service	Search engine (search for flights) specialized in multi-destination travel	Distribution of experiences and activities in Spanish in tourist destinations
Market	National (Spain)	International
Economic data	Founded in 2016 Total turnover: 4M €	Founded in 2008 Turnover (2018): 28.8M €
Communication	Young and fun style. Inspiring and humorous content about the concept of travel. Followers in social media: (01/04/2020; Facebook, Instagram and Twitter): 311K	Informative style. Useful information about tourist destinations. Followers in social media: (01/04/2020; Facebook, Instagram and Twitter): 371K

Example of a post before the crisis



Text on image: If one door closes, you have to open another, run and get on a flight.



1989).

In this study, we had the opportunity to access the communication activity of two Spanish OTAs from the beginning of the crisis: Airhopping and Civitatis. In addition to availability, another reason for selecting the two companies was that they represent online travel agencies who are leaders in the digital transformation of the tourist industry (Orange, 2019) and who have a strong presence in social networks as well as a defined strategy therein. Moreover, although their sales have dropped to zero they have shown resilience when facing up to the recovery, as recommended by the World Tourism Organization (2020). They are companies who shared similarities in terms of communication and business model before the crisis. This allows us to analyse the reaction in communication to a situation such as this and for which there are no precedents. The firms were willing to provide information about their current and future strategies and to participate in three interviews, at different point in time, to explain the evolution of their communication strategies.

Airhopping and Civitatis are two young online companies. Civitatis is the leader in online distribution of activities, excursions, and guided tours in Spanish at the world's top tourist destinations. Through its platform, travellers can book more than 30,000 activities at over a thousand destinations. Airhopping is an online travel agency specialized in multi-destination flights. Through its flight search algorithm, it offers its users the possibility to visit multiple destinations in a single trip for the price of a round trip. The CEOs of the two companies have managed to create successful models derived from their passion for the online world and their travel experiences. Both companies have a strong presence in social networks as one of their main communication channels, and have created online brand communities that exceed 250 K followers (see Appendix, Table 1).

As a consequence of the Covid-19 global pandemic, the two companies faced the biggest crisis in their history. Both Airhopping and Civitatis were forced to react: first, and immediately, in terms of communication, since travel has been restricted; and later, by having to redefine their strategy in terms of the return to tourism with restrictions.

3.2. Data collection

To gather data, we conducted three interviews with the CMOs of each company; the first five weeks after the State of Emergency was declared in Spain; the second, two months later, when the State of Emergency was drawing to a close; and the third, a year after the onset of the crisis. The interviews were conducted by video-call, following a semi-structured interview. The script of the interviews is shown in Table 2.

The data collection process followed the recommended protocol to ensure research reliability, validity, and credibility (Riege, 2003). The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim to ensure accuracy of information. In addition to semi-structured interviews, we collected information (publication content), about the companies' communication strategy in social media profiles (Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter) as well as data from SocialBlade (an external tool to track users' statistics in social media platforms) about the number of followers, together with data from news that appeared in the press over those days. Data from these two additional sources were triangulated with data derived from the interviews in order to enhance information credibility and were organized around topics and central questions.

4. Data analysis

The information obtained from observation and interviews was organized into several interrelated topics on communication strategy, following a chronological order of exposition, due to the relevance of the time variable in the succession of Covid-19 related events.

Table 2

Interview script.

First interview: 20 April 2020 (five weeks into the State of Emergency)	Second interview: 8 June 2020 (two weeks before the end of the State of Emergency)	Third interview: 19 March 2021 (two months after the start of vaccination in Spain)
<p>The beginning: When did you first start to sense a possible impact? What made you realise the magnitude of the situation? How long did it take you to react? What was the reaction in social networks? The impact: What has the impact on the business been? How do you see the repercussions? Are you confident of a return to normality? Have you considered a change to the business? How do you see the threats and opportunities? The communication strategy: Has the social network strategy been redefined? Has the tone of the content changed? The online community: How have followers reacted? Have the feelings generated by the current situation been transferred to the brand or to the interactions in the community?</p>	<p>Business strategy: Focused on national or international? Has what you have been doing since the outbreak of the crisis helped to spur a return? New products or services: Are you going to maintain what you offer or are you going to change it in some way? Have you changed anything? The communication strategy: Have you changed anything over the last few weeks? Are you envisaging any changes in the near future? The online community: Have you noticed any changes in your followers? In their attitude? Are you going to make any changes in communication? Will the opening up of borders affect the level of communication?</p>	<p>Business strategy: What results did previous action have? The communication strategy: Have you changed anything in terms of communication over these last few months? Have the resources dedicated to communication changed? The online community: What kind of response are you getting from followers? Are they still the same? Do they feel upbeat? Do they feel dispirited? Do they ask to travel? Do they ask more questions about travelling, about whether they can, about booking? Prospects: Are you planning to make any changes in the near future? Has anything in particular triggered that change? Would you change anything about what you have done so far?</p>

4.1. First interview

4.1.1. The initial impact on social media communication

It seems as though coronavirus reached Spain suddenly. Even though information was reaching from China (The New York Times, 2020), in January and February the likelihood of Covid-19 cases entering the European Union was deemed to be moderate (ECDC, 2020). Joking about coronavirus on social networks was commonplace. Yet the tourist sector was already beginning to see the real impact, with the first flights to China being cancelled, and international connections falling by 65% (CNBC, 2020).

“We saw that a lot of brands were joking about Covid-19, publishing memes, and laughing about it. We said ‘we are not going to risk it; this could well get out of hand’”. (Airhopping).

And then it hit Italy, with the country becoming the European epicentre of the pandemic in just a few weeks (Forbes, 2020a, 2020b; The Journal, 2020). Italy was a neighbouring country and one of the favourite overseas destinations for Spanish tourists. Closure of the borders led to the first flights being cancelled (BBC, 2020a, 2020b), and meant the suspension of all tourism to Italy. This coincided with the first cases being detected in Spain. Airhopping and Civitatis had to start adapting their communication on social networks. They were forced to recommend people not to travel. In addition, public sensitivity and awareness of the risk involved began to increase, which led to a restructuring of content.

“It almost felt like a small opportunity in terms of communication: ‘We are going to speak like experts. We have to cease all tourist activities related to Italy’”. (Civitatis).

“We reviewed the editorial calendar and some of the following publications could have been misinterpreted. ... we used a lighter tone those days”. (Airhopping).

Developments in Spain were coming to a head and on 14 March, with 4209 cases reported, the Spanish government declared a State of Emergency (La Moncloa, 2020), confining citizens to their homes. The two firms seemed to coincide in the idea of issuing a statement as the best way to approach the extraordinary situation that was being faced (Fig. 1).

“Even on March 10, and although the State of Emergency had not yet been declared, we saw it coming, we issued a statement: That seemed to calm people down a lot, Something was going on, and we couldn't simply disappear. It was our responsibility”. (Airhopping).

4.1.2. The communication strategy and the content

With the State of Emergency having been declared and with people confined to their homes and with Spain's borders closed, both Airhopping and Civitatis decided to continue publishing and to provide their followers with information.

As regards how often they published, whereas Civitatis decided to continue in the way it had always been doing, Airhopping confessed to having reduced the frequency of its communication. Nevertheless, they recognized that when the community is used to dynamic content being

published on a daily basis, the reduction in content has a substantial impact. Initially, the message focused on the issue of staying at home. It served as a guiding thread through which the tone of communication developed during the month of the pandemic, publishing different content.

“We kept on with the message ... ‘stay home’, ‘there will be time to travel’, ‘for the time being we will dream so that we can travel later’” (Civitatis).

The two brands followed a similar line, in which they left out the commercial angle, leaving to one side the idea of a quick sale, whilst keeping the main axis of their strategy: talking about travelling. Civitatis opted for inspirational content based on the notion of giving a new meaning to travel, in the only way it could be done; from home. Campaigns such as “a free tour of your house” or “#YoViajoEnCasa (#Itravelathome)” underline this editorial approach (Fig. 2). For their part, Airhopping spoke about memories, with their campaign “#VolveremosAViajar (#Wewilltravelagain)” until they reintroduced the humour that characterised the brand, using their usual comic strips and cartoons, referring to hope (Fig. 3).

“Within this new strategy, we have been through various phases. We went from the early important statements, in which we wrapped everything up in nostalgia and memories, ... and moved on to turn it into a bit of hope, ... we shall return, ... the world isn't going to stop gradually bringing back the element of humour”. (Airhopping).

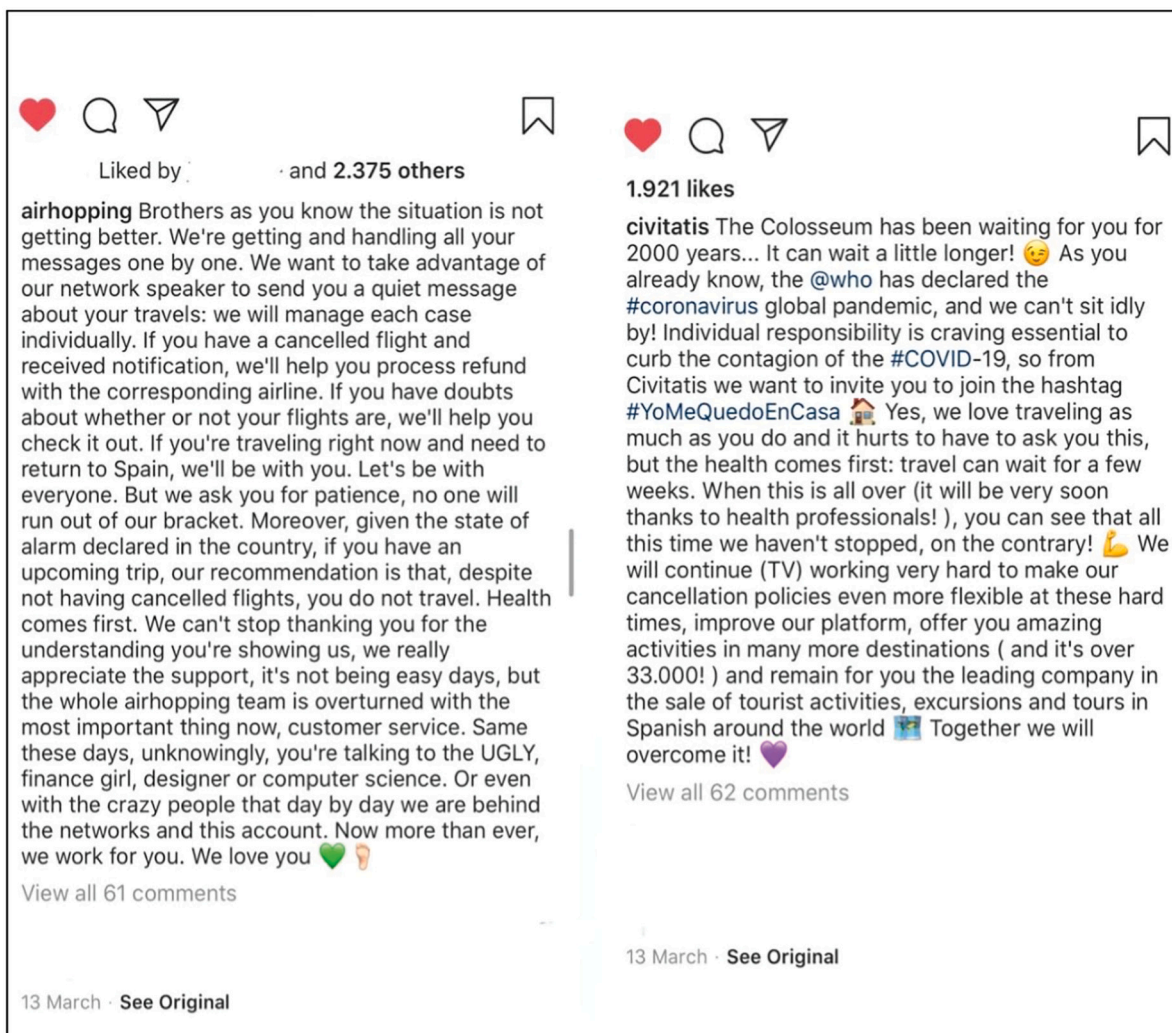


Fig. 1. Statement by Airhopping and Civitatis in social networks (Instagram).

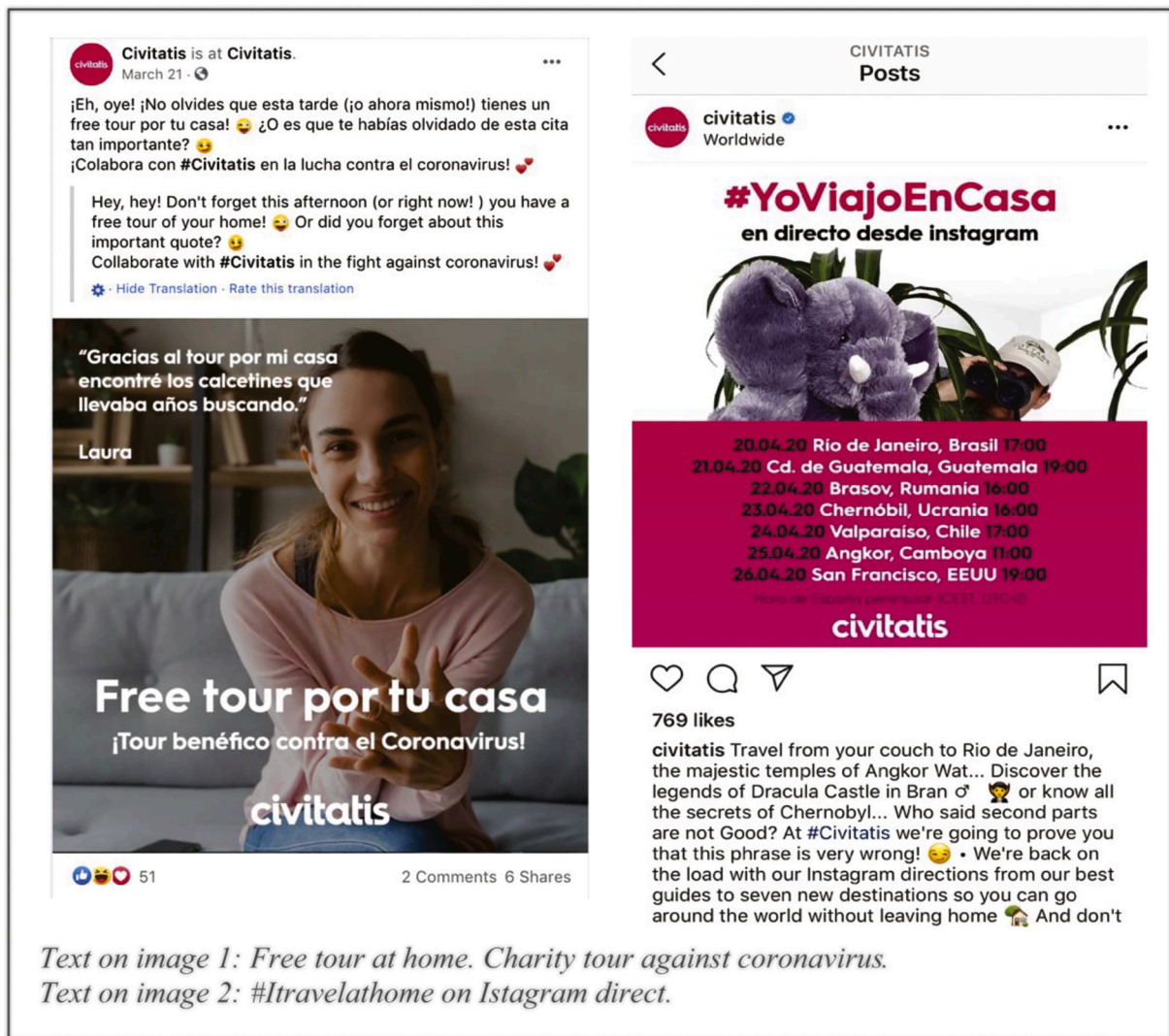


Fig. 2. Examples of Civitatis's posts on Facebook and Instagram.

The ever-changing environment, which was dependent on statements and releases from the health authorities, prevented any kind of structured timeline of content.

“Previously we had feed prepared 30 days ahead. Now, that was impossible, because everything changed week by week. [...] We were now guided by the various phases of the State of Emergency in order to create the publications We didn't improvise, but we simply couldn't plan as far ahead”. (Airhopping).

4.1.3. The reaction of the online community

Airhopping and Civitatis agree that they received positive feedback in the form of comments and messages in social media (Twitter and Instagram) from their followers, who thanked them for their efforts, bearing in mind what the sector was going through and the agencies' position. It is not a situation they would have chosen, and the brand communities are clear on this and empathise (Fig. 4).

“Many comments were along the lines of ‘how great it is to see firms who really care’ [...]. For people to say, look, these are still going, talking about the situation, and are committed to certain causes, etc.”. (Civitatis).

In this regard, the love of the brand also plays a key role, as does the feeling of community (Fig. 5). Airhopping recognises that the positive impact is due in part to this previous relationship with its community.

Being able to get close to what their clients were feeling at the time, thanks to the agencies' messages, and avoiding any sales-related pitch proved to be really positive. Had this not been the case, the results might have been very different, and the brands are aware of that.

4.1.4. The next steps

By 20 April, Spain was in lockdown. Its borders had been closed and there was no news concerning any imminent re-opening of them, not even at an interprovincial level. When asked at this point about future prospects, focusing on the summer, the peak season in the industry, Airhopping and Civitatis were very clear on the matter: they would be promoting trips again as soon as possible, yet following their current strategy, in other words not pushing sales too early.

“At a communication level, we will stay alert. The tone at the present time does not recommend travelling, but as soon as we can we will be promoting travel once again”. (Airhopping).

They also felt it important to foster the spirit of travel amongst their followers, which might have been affected. This might make the tone adopted in future a little less direct when offering their product.

“What could happen is that there might be more people who are a bit afraid, and who might take a bit longer to convince. This is normal. (Airhopping).



Fig. 3. Examples of Airhopping's posts on Instagram.

Civitatis, whose product offers activities abroad as well as in Spain, considered the possibility that their communication this summer might focus on promoting national tourism national, which can be done by car.

4.2. Second interview

When the second interview was conducted, Spain had already commenced its de-escalation. The country's de-escalation was planned as a series of phases, which the various provinces would move into individually. Between May 11 and 20 (one month after the first interview with the brands), all of Spain's regions were in phase 1 (El País, 2020). This meant that Spaniards could start leaving their homes in an organized manner, at different times of the day. Certain establishments were also allowed to resume business, depending on what sector of activity they were involved in. As regards tourism, news came on 23 May, when Pedro Sánchez, the Spanish prime minister, announced that national tourism would be allowed at the end of June, which meant permitting mobility between regions, and the arrival of foreign tourists as of July (Forbes, 2020a, 2020b). The issue of Spaniards travelling abroad would depend on how each country went about opening its own borders. Italy, for instance, did so on 3 June, whilst other countries established quarantine periods for any Spaniards who arrived, with others simply maintaining a ban.

4.2.1. Business strategy and new services

Here, it is particularly interesting to split the two cases and to look at them separately, since their offer was different.

In the case of Airhopping, its offer did not permit a change in communication and was limited until the re-appearance of international tourism. As a result, they decided, as part of their business strategy, to launch a new product: trips around Spain. Airhopping created programmed trips by regions. Travellers got in their car and had everything organized concerning where to go, where to stop, what to eat... All planned on a day-to-day basis. Travellers only needed to follow the recommendations. What is more, these recommendations came from the followers themselves.

"We knew we were right because the guide is based on the recommendations of locals. Then you have the hotels, ... a selection of establishments which unselfishly helped out with accommodation during the first few months of the crisis. We have found them and, in our own particular way, we want to give them something back in return for their help, by offering people the chance to get to know who they are, and so help them to fill up this summer" (Airhopping).

Following on from this, Airhopping's communication in social networks that summer centred on promoting their new product, once again focusing on sales and benefitting from their community to publicise their new product (Fig. 6).



Fig. 4. Examples of followers' reactions to Airhopping and Civitatis' activities on Twitter and Instagram.

“Communication in summer will focus entirely on national tourism, regardless of whether overseas borders are opened up or not... We are going to focus on Spain because that is what we advised people to do and is where we can be certain.” (Airhopping).

For their part, although Civitatis did not need to make any changes or to launch a new product, because they already offered activities in Spain, they stated that, at a strategic business level, they would be prioritising activities in Spain, and would be striving to expand and improve their offer. In contrast to Airhopping, Civitatis gave assurances that they would not be forgetting Spain, but that they would also be fostering international trips.

“We have prioritised the publication, creation and establishment of activities in places like Spain, Portugal or nearby... But that does not mean that we will not be focusing on other destinations. (Civitatis).

4.2.2. The communication content

In their communication, Airhopping highlighted the task of recovering their usual tone, as well as the freshness and flashes of humour that are characteristic of the brand and which were left slightly to one side during the most critical phases.

“Also starting to talk through our memes and through our usual inspiring content about travelling around Spain, so that people would once again have it in their minds through our daily content” (Airhopping).

They also used social networks to publicise their new product and to involve people in it (Fig. 7). Of the 14,888 people who expressed an interest in taking part (96.7% of those who participated in the survey), finally 3433 actively took part by sending their recommendations to Airhopping.

“We wanted followers to take part in the product. We let them know and began to speak about a new product we were going to launch, directly saying ‘Airhopping around Spain’, ..., this will help to encourage people. (...) what we did ... was to ask users for the help we needed, which is basically for them to give us recommendations about places they knew”. (Airhopping).

In the case of Civitatis, the firm faced a challenge in terms of communication in its networks. In their case, the product is global and they don't only sell in Spain.

“We have a lot of clients in Latin-America. Communication needs to proceed in two phases as there they are now going through the worst part of the pandemic. ... They still can't travel there. So that they see that we're not overlooking them, so that they don't feel the brand is foreign and don't



Fig. 5. Examples of followers' reactions to Airhopping and Civitatis customer attention in Twitter.

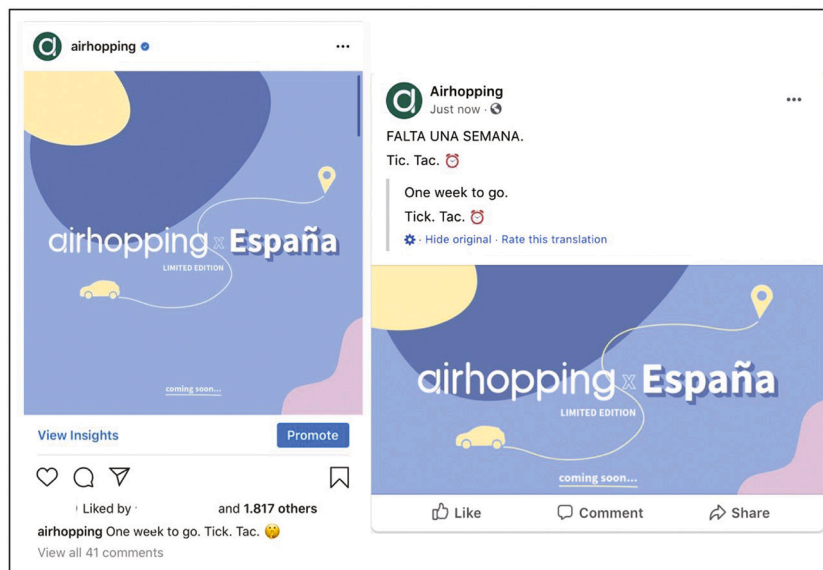


Fig. 6. Launch of a new national Airhopping product on Facebook and Instagram.

think that because people can now travel around Spain, that we are forgetting about them” (Civitatis).

As regards Spain, they highlighted that the focus in communication lay in referring to how safe their activities are, so as to inspire confidence in users.

“We feel that people will begin to travel without too much fear in that regard. That has been our biggest change, highlighting the safety measures our tours can now offer, and starting to invite people to book”. (Civitatis).

4.2.3. The relationship with the online community

Both firms believed that they had got it right, that keeping active in their social networks had been of enormous benefit so that at that moment, with a view to an actual return to tourism, their audiences were still out there, waiting, and willing to go on trusting them.

“We have always been sincere. If we had not said a word, the change would probably not now be understood, because they wouldn't have felt the company close to them”. (Airhopping).

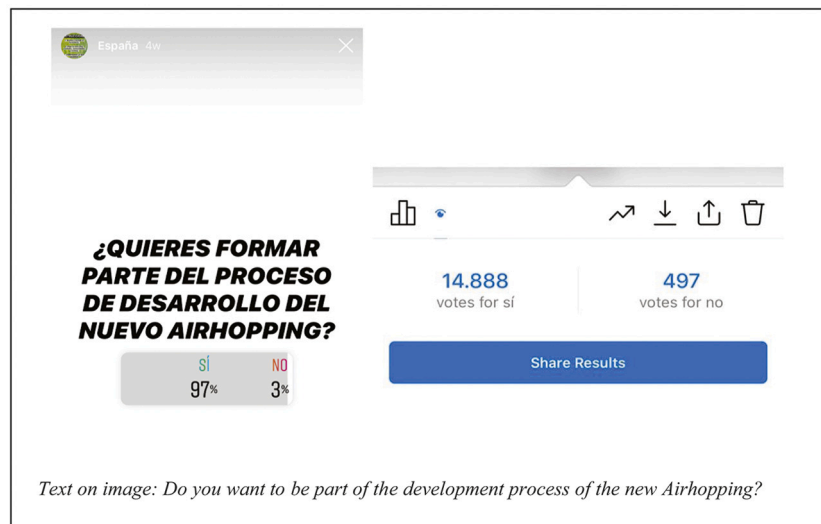


Fig. 7. Airhopping's request to its followers to support its new product (Instagram).

"I feel that we have done the right thing. It has actually helped with the interaction with our users. It has calmed them down, and it has to a certain degree shown the more human side of the company". (Civitatis).

4.2.4. The future of the business

It was obvious that the arrival of an effective vaccine would be the key for a return to a real normality, and that any possible fresh outbreaks would have an impact on tourism. The firms estimated that the gradual re-opening of international borders would not mean an automatic return to tourism, such that any marketing decisions would inevitably be constantly linked to how the Covid-19 situation evolved.

"International borders will gradually open up, but that does not mean that overnight we can make a huge effort in marketing to say 'eh, buy flights for Europe, or the Americas'. You simply can't do that. You have to think about the clients, about their fears, and about the fact that nothing is clear yet". (Airhopping).

4.3. Third interview

The start of the vaccination procedure, coupled with the first anniversary of the "state of emergency", meant that a third interview was necessary which would allow the position of the two firms to be seen vis-à-vis the changes that had taken place. A look at the results of the plans the two firms had put forward for the summer of 2020 reveals how this period heralded a shift in tendency, as both had anticipated, with the increase in national tourism leading to sales peaking, albeit temporarily. This optimism was also reflected in social networks, where user interaction rose considerably, with the brands' communications message once again adopting a more promotional focus.

"There was a lot of interaction. We were constantly being asked about trips, and we were able to promote these directly We devoted time to providing information on our networks about restrictions and travel requirements This was what we were ultimately being asked for; it was what people wanted to know". (Airhopping).

"We noticed that there was particular interest in destinations we were promoting at a national scale, plans we were discussing, people who were asking us 'is this open, is this not?'. In this regard, we did sense a lot of uncertainty amongst people". (Civitatis).

The problems appeared when the summer was over and Spain again found itself trapped in a fresh wave of rising numbers of infections. What

had seemed like a recovery turned out to be nothing more than a partial and isolated event, which had an impact not only on sales but again on communication in social networks.

4.3.1. How the presence in social networks has evolved

One very notable difference between the two brands during the crisis has been the different impact it has had in terms of followers. Whereas for Airhopping, this situation has led to a constant loss of followers, Civitatis has experienced a year of real growth, and has doubled its number of followers in Instagram (Fig. 8). This makes it interesting to look at what has made the difference between the two firms and why the results have been so different. On the one hand, Civitatis mentioned the firm's financial muscle, which has enabled it to hold prize draws and to maintain the resources the firm devotes to its communication department.

"It's true that we did have to rely on financial muscle when it came to growing ... Thanks to the company's history, which now stretches back quite a few years, we have been able to maintain my department and to keep up communication". (Civitatis).

Moreover, Civitatis pointed out that it is not merely a question of maintaining resources, but also that resources previously given over to advertising were now being used in the firm's social media strategy.

"The performance marketing and advertising part has been more low-key. Right now, we prefer not to advertise, and each six or eight weeks we might hold a prize draw with one of our suppliers ... This can be done by investing less in advertising". (Civitatis).

In comparison, the situation of Airhopping is exactly the opposite. They have seen resources in their marketing department cut to a minimum and have implemented a temporary redundancy plan, which has prevented them from carrying out an intensive communication strategy and has led to them publishing less.

"The marketing budget has been cut to the bare minimum, which has prevented us from devoting time and money to going about our usual activities Now we only publish on Instagram on the feed, and do so two or three times a week. We don't do any prize draws or promotional activities either". (Airhopping).

This reduction in resources has been accompanied by the emergence of new needs in the department; Airhopping is preparing to rebrand, which is placing even more restrictions on the resources dedicated to communication in its social networks.

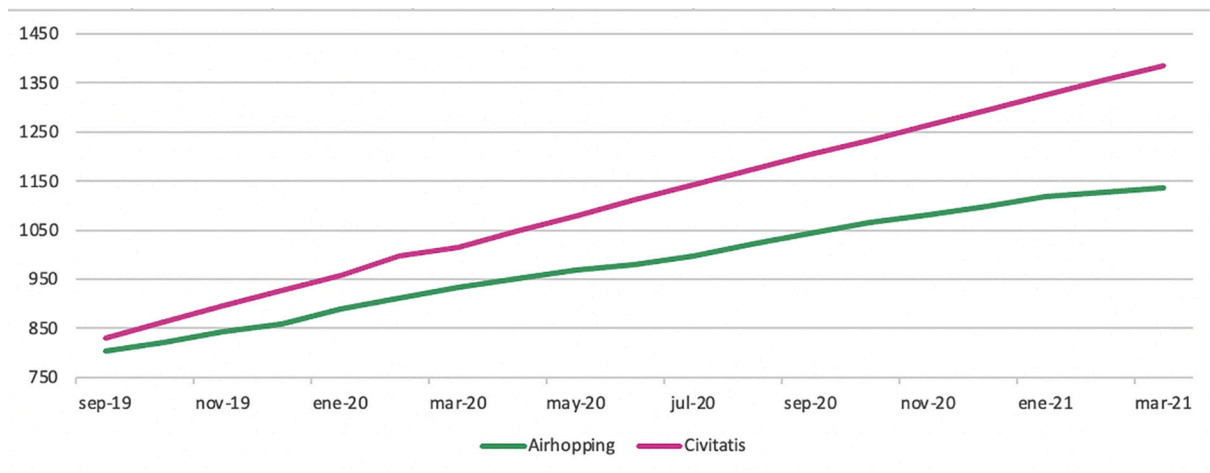


Fig. 8. Evolution of Instagram Published content.

“The product has made a lot of headway. ... We are planning to completely rebrand in a few months. ... This is partly why there is less interaction in social networks, because we are immersed in preparing this”. (Airhopping).

In line with data provided by the interviewees, Fig. 8 (Appendix) shows how the content published in both companies’ social media has evolved during the crisis.

A look at how the size of their communities has evolved through data in the SocialBlade platform (Fig. 9) reveals how Civitatis, which kept up more frequent publications during the pandemic, actually saw a rise in the number of followers compared to previous months. For its part, Airhopping, who published less often, saw its number of followers fall slightly after March 2020. As can be seen, this change in the number of followers is more noticeable in Instagram than in Twitter, where the

efforts on the part of the two brands is greater and where their strategy is more developed.

4.3.2. How the message has evolved

At the start of the crisis, both brands displayed similarities in their tone of communication and in the message conveyed to their community. This was initially a message of hope for the future, and later one that focused on domestic tourism and making the most of the summer. One year on, Civitatis and Airhopping have opted to take different paths with regard to their tone. Airhopping admitted that at one point, when they put themselves in the position of their community, the message was one of “desperation”.

“At first it was all very sad, the feeling that ‘we will travel again’ seemed very far off, conveying hope... When the summer came, we again adopted

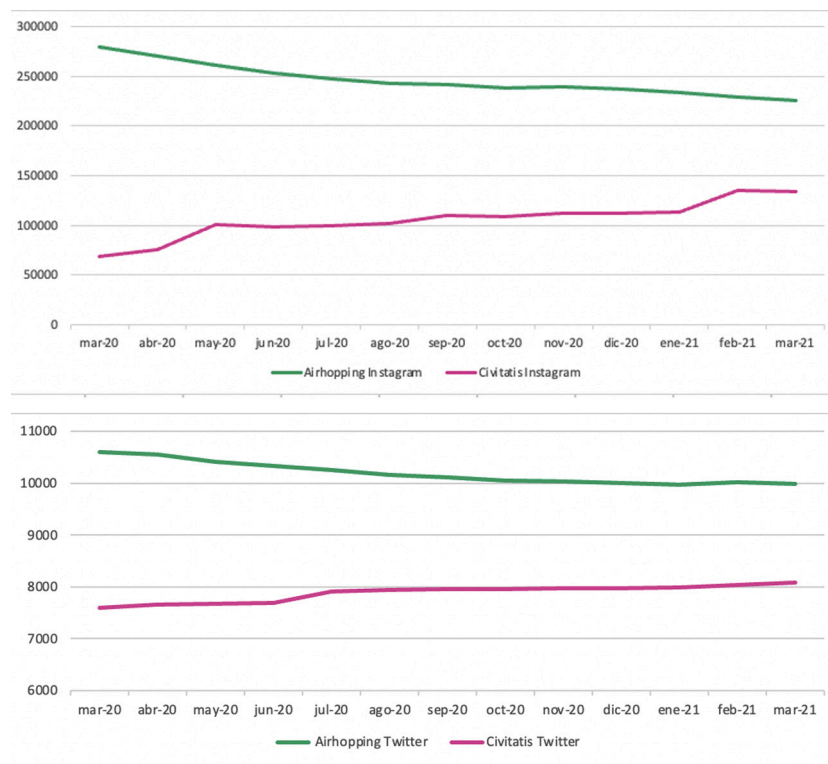


Fig. 9. Evolution of the number of Instagram and Twitter Followers.

that mood which characterises our tone and which we had totally cast off, and that was very noticeable amongst people. And now we have taken the next step: desperation, with humour. ... Our affable tone still there, but we no longer speak with hope, but with boredom ... In a way, it reflects the real situation people find themselves in: they are tired, desperate, but are also taking it with humour, because there is no alternative, which is why we are doing the same; we are a reflection of them". (Airhopping).

For their part, Civitatis has opted for communication that centres on promoting destinations, focusing on domestic tourism as in previous months as well as on international destinations for which trips can be planned over a longer time span.

"You could say that we are now doing it without pinning it to any fixed time: we don't say that you can't travel now, but we don't say when you will be able to travel either. ... We are committing more to Spanish destinations,... but also those you plan more in advance". (Civitatis).

4.3.3. How the community has evolved

In line with previous months, people are becoming increasingly dismayed. Both brands recognise that there is a sense of weariness amongst their followers, with people asking them questions about travelling that they are still not in a position to answer.

They are tired, not of us, but of the situation. They want to get away and they tell us that, although they know that we do not have the answer". (Airhopping).

4.3.4. Prospects for the future

If one clear conclusion does emerge for both Airhopping and Civitatis, it is that they cannot predict anything. They have to play it day by day, adapting to a constantly changing situation and with the uncertainty surrounding exactly when the tourist industry will recover and when things will get back to the long-awaited normality.

"We expect to continue more or less along the same lines, keeping a close eye on day-to-day events and on how everything is developing" (Civitatis).

"How we recover our communication in social networks will depend on the return to normality. The moment we can be sure about things ... resources will return". (Airhopping).

And when everything does return, both have ideas about what they will do to foster their users' desire and trust.

"... In a way, we can consider trying to act as a kind of example, as a reference, showing certain destinations and actually going there with our guides and so on; letting people know that it is open, showing people that it can be done". (Civitatis).

"We will be the first to encourage people to travel, not only because of the need to do so from a commercial standpoint, but also to show people that it is real, that they can, that it is safe. ... We have been telling them not to travel; so, now we are telling them that they can. They can trust us to be honest with them". (Airhopping).

5. Discussion and lessons to learn

From the experiences of these two organizations, we can draw the following lessons:

5.1. When to respond to an "imminent" crisis: immediately but, carefully

One feature of social media is its ability to communicate in real time and to respond quickly to users. Indeed, the use of social media in crisis communication is growing (Maal & Wilson, 2019). While a rapid

response is a key element in a crisis scenario, especially in organizational crises at a particular level, and when faced with such an uncontrollable, uncertain and delicate situation that concerns people's lives, prudence should prevail above speed when responding. The speed with which a crisis spreads must be matched by the crisis management team in their efforts to resolve it (Hayes & Kotwica, 2013). Mair, Ritchie, and Walters (2016) concluded that being able to enact crisis management plans quickly can help to mitigate some of the economic after-effects of a disaster.

In the pre-crisis scenario, some brands responded "rapidly" to the issue, but from a distant perspective of what was to come later, and their actions were penalized by their communities. Other companies, such as those interviewed, waited to see the actual scope of the situation. In short, before explicitly reacting to a crisis situation, what must be clear is the real impact, the significance and the plan to be followed, considering the various risks inherent therein.

5.2. What and how to communicate during crisis management: same target, but new messages and different execution

The role of marketing communications in restoring visitors to the destination is undeniable (Lehto, Douglas, & Park, 2008) and involves creating understanding, so as to form an attitude, strengthen an attitude, or even change an attitude (McCroskey, 2006).

Consumers demand that brands act during the crisis. According to the study by Edelman (2020), 65% of respondents said that "how well a brand responds to this crisis will have a huge impact on the likelihood of me buying that brand in the future". They also demand new ways of communicating, with messages based not on sales but on solutions ("84% focus advertising on how the products and services can help people cope with pandemic-related life challenges"), and actions that had worked until then are now penalized ("57 percent want brands to stop any advertising or marketing that is humorous or light-hearted"). As pointed out by Kirk and Rifkin (2020), the effects of some emotion-eliciting messages, i.e. humour, gratitude, etc., should be re-examined in the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic.

In the two cases studied, the brands have been adapting their strategies, and the corresponding execution, to the different scenarios, constantly adopting an attitude of caution. From deciding what terms to use to refer to the crisis (Covid 19, coronavirus, health crisis, pandemic, etc.) to the actual content or aim of the message. Travel agencies initially issued a recommendation not to travel. In this sense, Greyser (2009) explains that, in certain situations, the public will accept some degree of exaggeration in advertising and communications. However, in a crisis situation, critics and media tend to examine corporate response more closely in terms of content and time lag response.

Later, the situation gave way to a certain degree of optimism: #volveremosavijar (#wewilltravelagain) and agencies decided to elicit individuals' emotions and to evoke travel memories and the sense of community. Moreover, they had to bear in mind that, despite it being a global crisis, the message and its execution needed to be adapted to each segment. In this sense, internationalized companies must pay special attention to the recommendation to create accounts by country, not by languages, in order to adapt better.

5.3. Even without demand, the travellers must be at the heart of the business strategy (and of the communication strategy)

In times of crisis, more than ever, organizations have had to demonstrate commitment with their customers and to engender trust. As the interviewees have explained, all communication has become part of the customer service. Lehto et al. (2008) suggest that the first marketing message should aim to restore confidence in the minds of potential visitors. New missions and needs emerge (e.g., assistance in handling refunds for cancelled flights) that require reorganisation at the functional level, as well as a fast, agile and flexible response.

Certainly, communication requires a new content and a tone that is adapted to the customers' mood. Eventually, a new communication strategy has been required where the aim of the communication was not to talk about the business, but to provide content so as to encourage customers and generate trust. Moreover, messages need to be sincere and honest in order to gain followers' involvement and sympathy. Ongoing communication was seen to be especially valuable: interviewees stressed the importance of maintaining the frequency of publications; in other words "always being on" for the consumer.

5.4. The value of the community in times of crisis remains and may even increase

Social media are not only the showcase for promoting products and brands, but can also contribute positively to business performance when they strengthen the relationship with consumers. Indeed, effective relationships are those which achieve consumer involvement in communication and create value through interaction with the consumer (Rapp, Beitelbacher, Grewal, & Hughes, 2013). On the basis of the identity theory, it has been shown that the salient role or identity influences consumer behaviour (Stryker & Burke, 2000), such as donations (Arnett, German, & Hunt, 2003; Boenigk & Helmig, 2013) or attending events (Laverie & Arnett, 2000). In addition, individuals' perception that their behaviours are consistent with a given identity can enhance their self-esteem (Arnett et al., 2003).

Since identities provide meaning for individuals, being a follower of a brand in social media is a salient identity full of meaning. It is therefore vital to maintain the values associated with this identity. In this sense, the companies interviewed agreed on the importance of not losing the brand identity, the value this can provide to their followers, and what it symbolizes to them. Consequently, their communication strategies at the corporate level have not lost sight of these guidelines. In both cases, the orientation towards the online community has been maintained and, in response, the online communities have continued to participate actively in communications. The idea is to keep the community alive so that when the crisis is over we can try to become (or to remain) uppermost in consumers' minds when it comes to meeting their travel needs.

5.5. The value of the online community as a forum to share ideas and co-create new products and services

Product diversification has been suggested as a strategy for post-disaster recovery (Avraham & Ketter, 2008). Companies must reinvent themselves, yet may find new opportunities through their customers' involvement. In the cases studied, the companies have been able to engage their followers in their new projects. Their followers have seen the need for change in the business model, and have become involved in it. Thus, the value of the online community has been proved to be bidirectional: the company has been a source of trust, motivation, and inspiration to the followers, while the followers have helped renovate and innovate in the services through processes of co-creation. Also, could be interesting to observe whether the present participation in co-creation activities could affect the future evaluation of the travel experience (Lam, Ismail, & Lee, 2020).

6. Conclusions and future research

Tourism has always been impacted by crises and disasters, but never as much as it has been now. In the process of post-disaster recovery, marketing communications are perceived as essential (Lehto et al., 2008). In this study, we focus on analysing two OTAs; one dedicated to searching for and booking flights and the other to the distribution of experiences and activities at a destination. As did other hospitality and tourism industry companies, the two firms found themselves in a situation of zero activity and having to face the challenge of surviving,

maintaining their brand identity, and even trying to emerge stronger, by reinventing themselves with the support of their online community. Adaptation, flexibility, innovation, speed, and commitment, are ideas that are drawn from this study, in which we look at how communication through social media has helped generate value at three moments in time: at the beginning of the crisis, when the situation was at its most unfavourable and uncertain, at the beginning of the "new normality", when signs of recovery had begun to appear, even if the picture remained critical, and one year after the onset of the crisis, still in a context of uncertainty.

The role played by the community is key to maintaining the brand value or capital accumulated by companies prior to the crisis. This is why, even though the resources available to each organization or its financial solvency will have an impact on how relations with the online community are handled and the situation is "delicate", the community will not be forgotten. The study highlights that maintaining communication with the social media community is vital, so that when normality returns to travel, the brand will continue to enjoy the support of the community and will be able to re-establish itself (or reinvent itself) both quickly and efficiently. In this regard, financial support will be required, which is why firms have opted to shift the focus of the budget for other communication actions towards action in social networks.

In addition, communication content in social networks must adapt to firms' business circumstances (the impossibility of international travel, launching new services, offering local trips), but above all to the outside situation and mood of the client over time (uncertainty, fear, hope, optimism, frustration or boredom). The community thus becomes a mirror of individuals' emotions whilst at the same time seeking to influence them. Messages of a more marketing nature related to what the company has to offer are being abandoned and will only be taken up again when market conditions so allow and when users begin to display a certain degree of optimism.

Finally, future studies should explore social media communication with the brand during the crisis from the customers' point of view. This would provide insights into whether customers have felt support, trust, and relief, or whether the relationship with the brand has increased their engagement and future loyalty to the brand. In addition, quantitative studies might explore the impact of brand communication in social media during the crisis (messages, channels, content, frequency, etc.) in business recovery.

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