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Can a Mature Sun & Beach Tourist Destination Change Its Image Among Tourists? The Case Study of Lloret de Mar

Abstract

A destination's image plays a central role in conditioning the behavior of visiting tourists, and aligning tourism strategies with social networks may contribute to a destination improving its image among visitors. This study focuses on the impact of tourist strategies on how the tourist's image of the destination changes. A case study conducted in Lloret de Mar, a mature destination with a new strategic plan to change its tourist's image, is analyzed by monitoring the comments made by tourists on social networks over three years. Using software developed by Mabrian, over 600,000 Instagram and Twitter comments were analyzed to verify whether Lloret de Mar's efforts were giving results in their main markets. The results show a perception of change in the destination's image, which in turn leads to de-seasonalization and diversification of the destination's products. The research into and implementation of a different strategic plan have enabled a repositioning of the town's image in its different markets. Despite this, however, Lloret de Mar remains a sun and sand destination.

Keywords: destination image, social networks, tourist perception, Mabrian, Lloret de Mar

1. Introduction

Recent decades have seen destinations make concerted efforts to develop strategic planning policies, their goal being to foment the evolution or transformation of their image. The main drawback to these actions has been how best to assess their effectiveness. Authors such as Marrero and Santana (2008) have highlighted the gap between tourism strategies and the true situation of the destinations themselves, while Ferrer-Rosell and Marine-Roig (2020) have acknowledged the gap between the projected image and the perceived image in destinations, reporting a disconnect between supply-led actions and the behavior of demand.

On the other hand, social media platforms have become a powerful tool for online communications and content creation that allow tourists to interact and comment on tourism experiences in recent years. Because social media form part of the entire tourist experience, they have opened up new communication channels between tourists and tourism providers. This openness allows for interaction between consumers, providing destinations with user feedback and consumer behavior input (Sotidiadis, 2017) and allowing them to measure the impact of activities implemented by tourism providers.

Over the past few years, academic research in the social media field has focused on analyzing changes in tourist behavior and the impact of management by tourism providers (Sotidiadis, 2017). Research on destination image reveals that the projected image is either dissonant or congruent with the perceived image (Ferrer-Rossell & Marine-Roig, 2020). In order to establish the extent of this gap, the present study focuses on the use of social media networks as a tool for identifying changes in tourist behavior and how this results from changes in the image of the destination in question. Therefore, this study aims to ascertain the impact of

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tourist strategies on how the tourist's image of the destination changes. In this sense, it continues the work of those authors who have chosen to analyze tourism through social networks, such as Barcelos et al. (2019), Garay (2019), Marine-Roig et al. (2019) and Ghermandi et al. (2020), among others.

In order to meet the established aims, a case study was carried out of Lloret de Mar, a paradigmatic coastal tourist destination. It is a mature destination on the Catalan coast, which receives over 1,300,000 tourists annually, with more than 5,800,000 overnight stays.

Different technological tools were used to monitor comments made by tourists on social networks over three years. Our analysis of over 650,000 comments has allowed us to determine whether there has been any change in the destination's tourist image during this period, and if so, what those changes might be.

2. Literature review

2.1. Tourist destination image

Published research has generally found a correlation between the tourist's image of the destination and tourist consumption once there, resulting in a widespread consensus that a destination's image directly affects how individuals behave there (Bigné et al., 2001; Souiden et al., 2017). A number of research perspectives have been adopted to examine this duality, analyzing aspects such as: the role destination image plays at the various stages of destination choice; how the image affects tourist consumption while there (Chaulagain et al., 2019) shifts between the influence of the image and how this changes through the tourist's experience of the destination (Akgün et al., 2020) the concept of destination familiarity, how this links with its tourist image, and how that, in turn, affects tourist consumption once there (Tan & Wu, 2016) social-psychological stereotypes as an element of competitiveness between destinations and their respective tourist consumption (Shen et al., 2019) the role of tourist image in assessing and satisfaction with products and services the tourist consumes (Lee et al., 2019) and an analysis of how the image of important events conditions tourist behavior at the destination, both during and after the event (Lee, 2009; Guerreiro et al. 2020).

Therefore, previous research has revealed that a destination's image plays a vital role in conditioning the behaviour of visiting tourists. The shaping of this image has become one of the most widely studied fields in tourism research (Stylidis et al., 2015). While some studies have highlighted problems and a lack of consensus in defining or measuring this image, there is broad agreement that the term itself refers to the mental representation of the destination in the minds of individuals (Kock et al., 2016). Despite this agreement on the definition, a number of perspectives and models have been used to classify tourist images, the most widely accepted in academic circles being that posited by Gunn (Prats & Camprubí, 2009). Gunn (1972) classified tourist destination images into three large groups: the organic image, the induced image, and the modified image. Numerous authors have taken this classification as a starting point before modifying the model or giving it a new perspective. Miossec (1977) incorporated three kinds of emitted images: universal, ephemeral, and induced images. These theories have undergone profound reformulations, such as that expounded by Gartner (1994), who suggested that Gunn's (1972) three images had an effect on cognitive and affective attributes and incorporated cognitive behavior into the shaping of the tourist image. Galí and Donaire (2006) identified three kinds of images perceived by tourists: those perceived before, during, and after the visit. More recent studies, such as that conducted by Zhang et al. (2018), have distanced themselves from a categorization of destination image, identifying and classifying which of the destination's attributes shape its image, and how this is also shaped by tourist experience. This type of approach incorporates a more dynamic analysis of the tourist's image of the destination.

Particularly relevant in all this research is the wide-ranging review conducted by Gallarza et al. (2002), which listed six research categories, including how the tourist's image of the destination has changed over time.

However, according to the authors, the very complexity of this subject makes it the least-researched field. In large part, this is because the best tool for attaining a reliable assessment of this change in image is not a comparison of two samples at two different times, but, rather through longitudinal sample research (Bigné et al., 2001; Gallarza et al., 2002), this being one of the ways that research has found to address the problem in recent times.

2.2. Tourist behavior at destination through social networks

The explosive growth of the Internet and social networks has added complexity to shaping a destination's tourist image. Gupta et al. (2018) stated that although social networks have greatly impacted the tourism industry due to the amount of information they provide, they have also brought new analytical tools with them. Several studies have highlighted the central analytical role of social networks. Garay (2019) used Twitter, particularly the hashtag #visitspain, to analyze how the tourist image is shaped on a Spanish national level. Kiráľová and Pavlíčeka (2015) showed how aligning destinations' strategies with social networks contributed to improving their positioning and image management. Kim et al. (2017) focused on how the type of tourist information published by the destination influences social networks and how this, in turn, transforms the image of the destination itself. Ghermandi et al. (2020) used social networks to understand the behavior and interaction of international visitors to the Mexican coast. Zeng and Gerritsen (2014) based their study on the role social networks play in tourist behavior, stating that research should focus on visualizing the impact social networks have on the tourism industry. Dolan et al. (2019) examined how tourist complaints on social networks, and specific complaints regarding an airline, resulting in increased or decreased value generated for the industry as a whole. Barcelos et al. (2019) analyzed how destinations' attitudes towards social networks affect tourist behavior and how customers process information. Lastly, Marine-Roig et al. (2019) proposed a theoretical framework to measure destination image through online travel reviews, especially on TripAdvisor.

Thus, the use of social networks as a tool to analyze tourist behavior has been a constant over the past decade, helping to fill the void mentioned by Bigné et al. (2001) and Gallarza et al. (2002) with regard to analyzing changes in the tourist's image of the destination. Furthermore, according to Marine-Roig et al. (2019), social networks have great importance in analyzing the perceived destination image because they contain free and reliable information that is spread quickly among tourists.

3. Methodology

3.1. Choice of destination

The chosen tourist destination is Lloret de Mar, located on the Costa Brava, Catalonia, Spain. Since Barbaza (1966) analyzed the Costa Brava from a tourism and sociological viewpoint, numerous authors have studied its development and tourist model. Noteworthy among these are Cals (1982), Fraguell (1993, 1997, 2007), Donaire (1996, 1997), Mundet (1997, 1998, 2000), Galí (2004), Martí (2005, 2007), Saló (2005), Calabuig (2006) and Marin et al. (2018). All of these studies have viewed Lloret de Mar as one of the most paradigmatic towns in relation to regional changes in tourism. The industry in Lloret de Mar has evolved from pre-Fordist, small-scale, and traditional to the current post-Fordist mature coastal destination. Tourist activity has developed significantly in the town, and it currently offers more accommodation than anywhere else on the Costa Brava, ranking third in Catalonia (2018). In 2019, Lloret received over 1.3 million tourists, with 5.8 million overnight stays. It has over 120 hotel establishments with 29,000 beds.

Figure 1
Location of Lloret de Mar in Europe

Figure 2
Location of Lloret de Mar in Spain

However, Lloret de Mar has a special phenomenon or idiosyncrasy attached to it: its tourist image has always been closely linked to nightlife. At times this has been highly controversial among the local population, and the Town Council has made a number of attempts to distance the destination's image from this segment, including the implementation of a Strategic Plan to focus on how the town oriented itself towards tourism, with goals to be met by 2014. Partly as a result of this plan, and partly due to efforts by a number of local tourism actors, Lloret de Mar has made great strides to reposition itself with new values.

A good example of this effort can be found when analyzing Lloret Tourism Board's action plans and annual reports for 2017, 2018, and 2019. Said documentation includes strategic directions and focuses on products and markets, following the line established in the previous Strategic Plan. The goals established in these plans and maintained over the three years analyzed here are as follows: brand repositioning; consumer retention; the welcome offered by the town; deseasonalization; business generation; and increased profits. The target public were visitors to Lloret, tour operators, the media/prescribers, and residents. Greater efforts were made in relation to promotion and communication for two large groups: first, strategic markets, i.e., Catalonia/Spain, France, the United Kingdom, and eastern European countries; and second, priority markets, i.e., Italy, Benelux, Germany, and Scandinavia.

Regarding the tourist product, the different actions where publicity and communication efforts have been made are as follows: culture; sports tourism, and particularly Lloret Cycling; business and congress tourism; gastronomic tourism, in conjunction with the LlorEat Brand, and Fundació Alícia; family tourism and Lloret Nature.

In contrast with the more frequently used images to promote traditional destinations like Lloret de Mar, none of the publicity or communication actions explicitly referenced nightlife. Sun and sand tourism was only present as a complement to other products, such as family and sports tourism.

Aside from those actions that formed part of the destination's tourism marketing strategy, two particularly important changes had an impact on the profile of tourists visiting the destination. The first was the arrival of the Jet2 airline to Girona Costa Brava airport (Lloret de Mar's reference airport) in May 2016. With another company from the same group, Jet2 holidays, the Jet2 airline sells Costa Brava holidays to a predominantly family-oriented market. Over the three years analyzed (2017, 2018, and 2019), an average of over 150,000 passengers per year arrived via these two companies. This has had an impact on the destination's deseasonalization (April-October); it also implies a change in the profile of the British visitor, who is presumably now more interested in the natural, cultural, and family-oriented holiday, and less in holidays based around nightlife. Secondly, Jam Reisen, a German tour operator with strong links to holidays focusing on the town's nightlife, ceased operations in the summer of 2018 after 16 years of operating in Lloret de Mar.

There is plenty of evidence of the choices Lloret made regarding its competitive positioning in the period analyzed. One of the problems arising from the strategic planning processes carried out, which other mature destinations share, is the ability to analyze whether actions undertaken by the town have actually changed the destination's image and, in turn, tourist behavior there.

3.2. Social network platforms analyzed

In order to observe whether these efforts have led to a change in the tourist's image of the destination, we deemed it convenient to follow the lines of recent research, which has shown how social networks act as amplifiers for tourist behavior at the destination. Two social networks were chosen: Instagram and Twitter. Their fame and traceability were deciding factors in this choice, both being in the Top 5 for social network user numbers during the entire research period. Furthermore, they both permit a certain degree of analysis concerning users and generated content; other social networks were discounted as they provide less clear information for analysis.

3.3. Definition of sample

Information was compiled over three full calendar years, from 1st January 2017 to 31st December 2019; this was then collated and analyzed. Data are shown in annual aggregates. The focus was on the following hashtags on both social networks, which were chosen over others due to the number of mentions they received: #ллорет; #lloret; #lloretdemar; #льорет. The software developed by Mabrian Technologies was used to select and analyze the information, producing 685,101 comments or mentions.

3.4. Information filtering process

One of the problems researchers face when analyzing information on social networks is filtering tourist-related information or Tweets from those unrelated to tourism. The following filtering stages were used to overcome this:

- Word filter: a group of terms was filtered through empirical experimentation, permitting the discarding of a series of mentions unrelated to tourism.
- Functional norms: linked to user and commentator profiles, mentions unrelated to tourism were discounted.
- Learning algorithm: once again, using technology developed by Mabrian, which has an algorithm that enables machine-generated learning to eliminate spam or elements related to current events in the town.

This process left us with a total of 243,506 comments. Of these, 208,737 were on Instagram and the remaining 34,769 were on Twitter.

It is also interesting to observe whether these appeared as hashtags or literal mentions (any mention may have contained several, and the number of mentions may therefore have been higher than the number of comments). Regarding hashtags, we found the following:

Table 1
Hashtag mentions on social media

Hashtag	Mention
#ллорет	1,370
#lloret	44,389
#lloretdemar	175,674
#льорет	698

Table 2
Literal mention on social media

Word	Mention
Lloret	47,306
Lloret de Mar	7,228

3.5. Comment categorization

The comments were placed in categories to form an extensive corpus of words encompassing a wide range of category-related concepts. The use of keywords, categories, and mentions avoided the potential risk of using sub-categories, which may contain too few mentions, and would have compromised the credibility of the results. This process resulted in nine product category groups: *cultural, natural, family, gastronomic, active, nightlife, shopping, sun and sand, and wellness*.

3.6. Data enrichment

Having obtained this amount of information, we proceeded to analyze it and cross-reference it with user profiles. This was done through a data enrichment process, the tools used for this again being provided by Mabrian Technologies. Several tools were combined to identify the age and gender of those users who had made comments. User profiles provided the basic information, which was then combined with facial recognition software. This both minimized bias and produced an age and profile of those who had made comments.

4. Results

4.1. Analysis of uncategorized mentions and origins

When analyzing the information obtained, the first focus was on the main mentions on both social networks. The ten most frequent mentions over the three years were as follows:

Table 3
Evolution in Lloret de Mar's top 10 attractions over the years studied

Mention	Category	Percentage 2017	Percentage 2018	Percentage 2019
Disco Tropics (disco)	Nightlife	32.8%	22.4%	16.2%
Platja de Lloret (beach)	Sun and beach	10.7%	11.2%	13.1%
Platja de Fenals (beach)	Sun and beach	10.5%	13.4%	12.3%
Santa Clotilde gardens	Culture	10.0%	11.4%	14.6%
Cami de ronda (coastal pathway)	Nature	7.2%	8.6%	9.1%
Cala Banys (beach)	Sun and beach	6.9%	5.9%	6.4%
Cala Sa Boadella (beach)	Sun and beach	6.8%	7.5%	8.1%
Water World (water park)	Active tourism	5.3%	0.0%	6.0%
Sanddance (disco)	Nightlife	5.1%	7.0%	0.0%
Gnomo Park (kids play park)	Active tourism	4.7%	0.0%	0.0%
Teatre de Lloret (theatre)	Culture	0.0%	7.0%	6.5%
Sant Roma (cultural heritage)	Culture	0.0%	5.6%	7.8%

The little change among the most frequently mentioned elements is clear evidence of the continuing popularity of Lloret's most important attractions; of the top 10 in 2017, only two disappeared from the 2019 list (Sanddance and Gnomopark). However, Figure 3 depicting the relative weights of the various mentions tells quite a different story.

Figure 3
Evolution in Lloret de Mar's top 10 attractions over the years studied

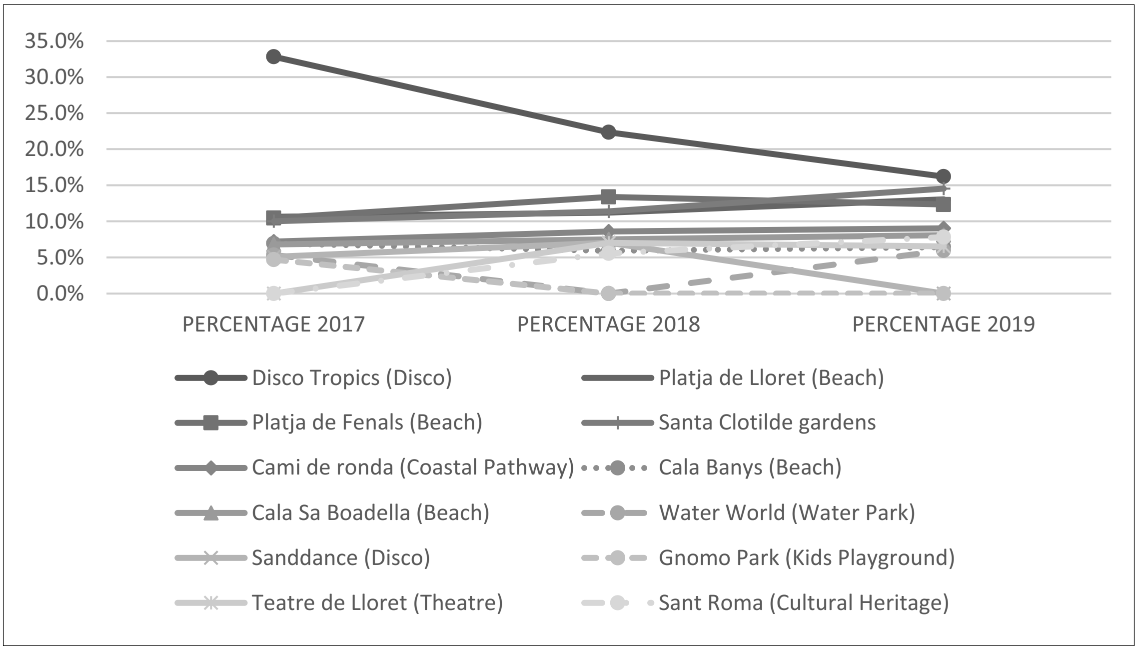


Figure 3 shows the evolution of the different mentions, and leads us to draw the following conclusions:

1. The weight of nightlife was particularly important in 2017, with two of the town's most important venues (*Discotropics* and *Sanddance*) among the most mentioned, achieving a total weight of 37.9 % of the Top 10 mentions. After 2017, there was a clear continuous drop to just one mention in the Top 10 in 2019. It then represented 16.2% and had fallen from 1st to 4th place.
2. The loss of sectorial weight suffered by nightlife was compensated for by a relatively similar redistribution among other mentions; that is, no single category accounted for the entire loss. The effect was that of a mosaic across the whole spectrum of most frequently mentioned places in Lloret de Mar.
3. There was a clear trend towards a greater presence of cultural venues as far as categorization is concerned. While in 2017, there was just one representative element of culture (with a weight of 10%), in 2019, there were three, with an overall weight of 28.9%. Furthermore, this was the category that generated the most comments.
4. The remaining categorizations showed similar relative weights, with slight percentage increases.

If we no longer limit the list to the Top 10, we note both similarities and differences. Table 4 shows this behavior over the period analyzed.

Table 4
Behaviour by category over the years studied

Category	2017 Percentage	2018 Percentage	2019 Percentage	Absolute difference	Percentage difference (2017-2019)
Sun and beach	38.7%	34.4%	28.6%	-10.1	-26.1%
Nightlife	17.7%	13.6%	11.9%	-5.8	-32.7%
Culture	11.0%	13.1%	12.4%	1.4	12.4%
Nature	8.2%	8.7%	8.7%	0.5	5.5%
Active tourism	7.4%	9.6%	11.0%	3.6	48.9%
Gastronomy	6.6%	7.3%	9.8%	3.2	48.5%
Family	5.5%	8.5%	10.8%	5.3	97.4%
Wellness	2.8%	2.7%	2.6%	-0.2	-7.0%
Shopping	2.1%	2.2%	4.3%	2.2	105.6%

When incorporating all mentions, we see how the weight of the various products changes with regard to the results obtained if attention is only paid to the main mentions. Analysing Table 4, we can conclude the following:

1. The confirmation of a trend towards a greater mosaic of self-complementary products, and the lower presence of any single product, whether linked to nightlife or sun and sand.
2. The category with the highest percentage fall in mentions was nightlife; this confirms the observation for the Top 10 mentions.
3. The main absolute fall was in the sun and sand category; despite this, it was still the most frequently mentioned product.
4. As far as increases are concerned, cultural tourism has been the main benefactor. An analysis of comments shows a clear positive trend. However, this must be qualified: while not the main focus of comments, it did replace nightlife in second place. A sharp percentage increase (12.4%) was found in the number of comments.
5. The highest percentage increases were seen in those categories, with a lower presence in 2017. There has been a substantial increase in mentions of shopping and family tourism (105.6% and 97.4%), respectively.

Beyond the categories themselves, the appearance of gender-related elements is particularly informative. There was a higher proportion of male user profiles (54.2%) than female (45.8%). Furthermore, analysis of gender behavior in the three main product categories (sun and sand, cultural and nightlife) showed a gender bias:

1. There was a 14.14 percentage point female bias in the sun and sand category in relation to the global sample proportion, where female user profiles made 59.9% of comments.
2. The opposite was the case in relation to nightlife (although nearer the percentages of the overall sample), with a far greater male presence, 57.5% of the comment-generating profiles being male (3.29 percentage points higher).
3. We once again found a more female bias regarding culture, with 56.1% of the comment-generating profiles being women. This was 10.32 percentage points above the expected values.

4.2. Analysis of mentions by product category

The second part of the analysis gathered data regarding the countries and products that had been mentioned on social networks. Those originating from the Spanish market were discounted, as they included mentions by the local population, with the corresponding distortion. The seven principal markets were selected and then analyzed using the Mabrian tool. These markets were France, Italy, the United Kingdom, Germany, Poland, the United States, and Belgium.

The data showed France to have been the predominant market over all three years. Figure 4 shows the evolution in the share of comments made by social network users from the seven markets. The substantial fall in the German market and a similar rise in the British market are both worth highlighting. The general fall in mentions across the whole of the German market may result from the end of nightlife-based tourism.

Figure 4
Evolution of information sharing on social networks in the different markets analysed

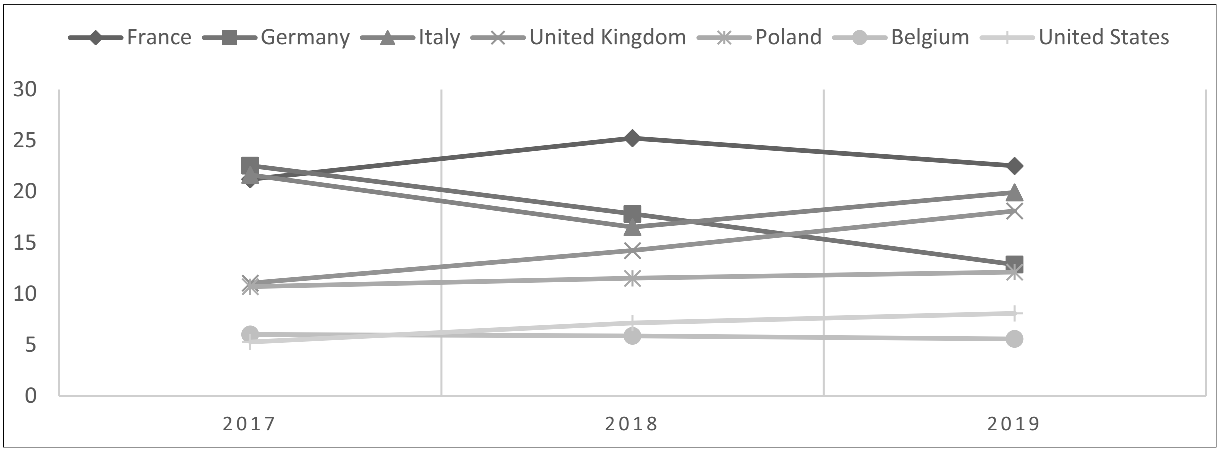


Table 5 shows the percentage difference in the selected markets in relation to the products by category for 2017–2019, revealing a rise in the mention of cultural and nature products across all markets. On the other hand, there was a clear decline in nightlife and sun and beach mentions in most of the markets. The following analysis focuses on those categories that had a greater increase or decrease in mentions and analyzes each market individually to identify any differences in the tourist profile in each market.

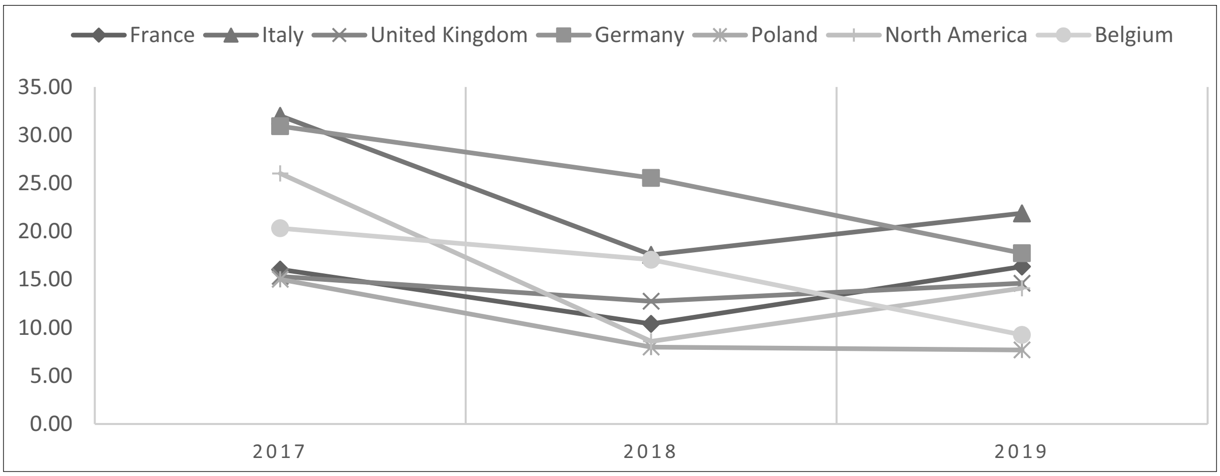
Table 5
Percentage difference in the markets by product (2017 – 2019)

Category	France	Italy	United Kingdom	Germany	Poland	North America	Belgium
Sun and beach	-12.26%	-6.19%	-17.78%	7.04%	-4.44%	8.09%	-5.08%
Nightlife	2%	-31.63%	-4.63%	-42.64%	-48.80%	-45.81%	-54.45%
Culture	71.49%	63.77%	33.88%	43.69%	20.73%	39.42%	84.11%
Nature	7.41%	77.97%	234.33%	8.36%	134.51%	339.27%	41.31%
Active tourism	28.27%	-13.66%	-60.68%	134.74%	-25.62%	-39.36%	-40.47%
Gastronomy	4.01%	-8.13%	11.83%	20.20%	-26.29%	36.44%	28.42%
Family	-24.61%	39.90%	84.37%	0.71%	-8.06%	-27.77%	194.55%
Wellness	-42.68%	31.88%	-30.30%	-39.10%	38.06%	-65.96%	69.09%
Shopping	33.72%	90.24%	67.50%	37.50%	-100.00%	185.99%	244.44%

An analysis by categories reveals that those to have undergone the greatest changes were: sun and beach, nightlife, culture, nature, and family. These have therefore been highlighted and analyzed further. Considering the sun and beach category, the table shows that five of the seven markets showed a slight decrease in mentions of this product, which can be attributed to deseasonalization opportunities for the destination, given the varied products built around culture, family, and nature. Despite mentions of sun and beach falling in these five countries, this product was still the most frequently mentioned across all markets.

Although mentions of nightlife fell in six of the seven markets over the three years, the greatest decline in most markets was in 2018, with the German and Belgian markets showing a continued fall in mentions of this product. That being said, the overall difference and decline of mentions were above 30% in five of the markets, hinting at a shift in the profile of tourists visiting the town. Figure 5 shows the mentions of nightlife for the three years analyzed.

Figure 5
Mentions of nightlife product by country in 2017 - 2018 - 2019



As for culture, all markets witnessed an increase in mentions during the period analyzed. The smallest rise was 20% (in the Polish market), and the largest was 84% (in the Belgian market). Mentions of culture in the town's Top 10 attractions rose from 10% in 2017 to 30% in 2019; this can be seen as largely due to the increase in cultural products and services on offer in Lloret, such as Santa Clotilde Gardens, Sant Romà church, and the Lloret Theatre. This behavior gives a further hint of a change in the profile of tourists visiting the destination and a shift in the town's policy to provide a variety of products and change its image.

Another category that saw a rise in mentions across all countries was nature, being above 40% in five of the seven markets. Four of these five countries also showed a steep decline in mentions of nightlife. In the British market, mentions of nightlife decreased slightly (4.63%), while those of nature underwent a huge increase (234.33%). The German market showed a large decrease in mentions of nightlife (-42.64%), but a slight increase in mentions of nature (8.36%), while the French market showed a minor increase in both the nightlife (2%) and nature (7.41%) categories. These results reflect the effort that the Lloret de Mar Tourism Board has made to award more value to local nature, as well as the switch in profile in most of the markets, primarily the Italian, British, Polish, and Belgian.

A similar finding is observed for the family category: in four of the markets where mentions of family increased, there was a fall in the number of mentions of nightlife. However, the French market saw a 24% fall in mentions of family and was the only market that showed a rise in nightlife. The two markets that reflected a fall in mentions of both the family and nightlife were Poland and the United States. The German market showed a very slight increase in mentions of family (0.71%), while nightlife fell (-42.6%); however, there were very sharp rises in mentions of active (134%) and cultural (43.7%) tourism.

In terms of the individual markets, the French showed a slight increase in mentions of nightlife and a continual fall in the most-mentioned category, that of sun and sand. There was also a substantial decrease in mentions of family tourism and increases in a range of other categories. These were most notable in culture (71.49%) and active tourism (28.27%). The progressive fall in mentions of sun and sand may be due to a greater year-round diversification of tourists interested in these other categories.

In contrast, the Italian market showed a steep fall in nightlife (32.63%), sun and sand (6.19%), and active tourism (13.66%). Radical shifts in how the destination is seen are supported by the observed increases in natural, cultural, and family tourism. This is a clear sign of a new profile of tourists in this market: more family-oriented and with a wider range of interests at the destination; there was also less youth tourism.

The British market showed a progressive decline in sun and beach (17.78%), nightlife (4.63%), and active tourism (60.68%), while there was an increase in culture (33.88%), nature (234.33%), and family (84.37%). These data may be evidence that the progressive introduction of the Jet2 Holidays tour operator, with direct flights between the United Kingdom and Girona Costa Brava airport from May 2016, led to a rise in the number of families taking non-peak season holidays (outside July and August) at the destination.

The German market showed notable changes in a number of fields. A fall in nightlife (-42.64%) went hand-in-hand with sharp rises in active (134.74%) and cultural tourism (43.69%), while sun and sand rose to a more moderate degree (7.04%).

Regarding the Polish market, there was a notable fall in mentions of nightlife (-48.8%), one of the sharpest in the whole study, together with a small decline in sun and sand (-4.44%) and active (-25.62%) tourism, and an enormous increase in nature (134.5%) and cultural (25.62%) tourism. These results provide evidence of a clear increase in the deseasonalization of the Polish market, bringing with it tourists who are far removed from the profile of young tourists primarily interested in the destination's nightlife.

Mentions of nightlife fell by 45.81% in the North American market, and similar falls were recorded in active (39.36%) and family (27.77%) tourism. In contrast, rises were observed in culture (39.42%), gastronomy (36.44%), and a slight increase in sun and sand (8.9%). This indicates knowledge of the destination and its products and increased stays due to the investment in 5-star hotels. It also suggests knowledge of the complementary products and services on offer.

Lastly, we have the Belgian market, which showed the most notable fall in nightlife among all countries studied (-54.45%) and decreases of 5.08% in sun-and-sand and 40.47% in active tourism. While such results were taken from the comments of young tourists, the increase in mentions of cultural (84.11%), natural (41.31%), and family tourism (194.55%) correspond to an older profile of tourists with wider interests.

The above analysis leads us to draw the following conclusion: although all markets behaved differently, they all shared a change in profile reflected by a decline in nightlife mentions and a shift towards mentions of other types of categories promoted by the Lloret Tourism Board, such as culture, nature, family and active tourism.

5. Conclusions

The aim of this study was to verify whether recent actions implemented by Lloret de Mar Town Council have enabled a repositioning of its image and the behavior of its tourists. This may be closely linked to destination lifecycle theory, originally mooted in Butler's model, which, despite the many changes and adaptations it has undergone, represents one of the paradigms in tourist destination development (Lundtorp & Whanhill, 2001). Furthermore, authors such as Foster and Murphy (1991) and Berry (2000) have noted the problems involved in its practical application and the characteristics and idiosyncrasies that strongly condition each destination or the sector's global development. In the case of Lloret de Mar, we have seen how actions undertaken in a mature coastal destination have contributed to its repositioning and a change in consumer behavior.

This study takes into account the call for studies on the projected image of a destination made by Nghiêm-Phu (2014) in his literature review and contributes to enriching prior research on the use of social networks to identify consumer behavior, such as that conducted by Garay (2019), Kim et al. (2017), and Ghermandi et al. (2020). Analyzing social media networks and mentions of the tourist destination demonstrates the importance of measuring the data available on these networks as tools for measuring the impact of strategic tourism actions. It also demonstrates that the continuous and constantly changing process undergone by the tourism model in Lloret de Mar has generated a perceived image of the destination that is congruent with the policies applied by the DMO and other destination stakeholders, leading to product diversification and deseasonalization of the tourist season. The mentions analyzed here showed a clear trend towards a different image of Lloret de Mar in line with deseasonalization and diversification of the product, to slowly leave behind its image of a destination catering to nightlife and young people.

It also reveals that the influence of the tourist's image on behavior once at the destination, as noted by authors such as Bigné et al. (2001) and Souiden et al. (2017), is faithfully reflected in the case of Lloret de Mar. The theory is that if the destination's inductive agents (based on Gartner's model, 1993) implement an intensive publicity strategy largely linked to culture, there will be an overall increase in comments on social networks referring to culture; in our case, this increase crossed all analyzed markets and was sustained over the three-year study. It would also confirm the vision of authors such as Cànoves et al. (2006) and García and Alburquerque (2003), who considered that cultural tourism could serve as an impetus for reconversion or complementary tourism in mature coastal destinations.

This study of Lloret once more highlights the findings from Kim et al.'s (2017) analysis, where the transformation of a destination's image led to an increase in comments regarding family tourism as well as a clear fall in the number of comments referring to nightlife. However, one element remained unchanged in the eye of the consumer. Despite its infrequent mentions in publicity material, the presence of sun and sand tourism has remained a core element in tourist consumption. The data gathered here show that comments linked to sun and sand remained robust, in contrast to the fall in references to nightlife. This decline was the result of tourism actors at the destination who have explicitly discouraged such tourism. Along these same lines, this would confirm the views of a range of authors who have stated that, despite all the efforts of coastal destinations to reposition and reconvert themselves, sun and sand remains a fundamental part of tourist appeal in coastal destinations.

While actions designed to reposition the tourist image and competitiveness of Lloret de Mar have clearly had an effect on consumers, it is no less true that elements external to the strategy itself have also played a role.

Examples of this are the arrival of the airline Jet2 and Jet2 Holidays in May 2016 and the closure of Jam Reisen, the main tourist nightlife promoter, with particular emphasis on the youth market. In both cases, it is hard to establish whether these were elements that conditioned the results or whether their presence and disappearance were partly the consequence of the destination's tourist strategy itself.

Continuing with this analytical framework, further research deriving from this study might investigate the impact that COVID-19 has had on the time series. Considering a clear demand oriented towards internal consumption – given the minimal influx of international tourists – the data analysis processes will be completely biased. In this respect, a continuance of this study following the same parameters for data analysis will give little value to this series and make it impossible to evaluate the real impact of tourism arriving from outside Spain. The DMO should continue to analyze these data to establish improvement indicators and changes in the profile of consumers in future seasons. Furthermore, several questions arise from this research given the global health context: Will the time series be continued ignoring the years of the pandemic? How can biased visions be included in the time series? How can the impact of strategic planning be assessed in uncertain contexts? All that being said, in order to analyze the evolution of the tourism sector, it will be necessary to have the corresponding tools to monitor it.

5.1. Practical implications

Destinations should use the proposed analysis and research methods, like the model proposed in this article, to analyze and measure the impact and efficiency of the policies made around the promotion of a destination in the short term. This will help them identify tourists' feedback and implement concrete actions to change the destination's image.

5.2. Limitations and future research

It should be noted that this study has several limitations that should be addressed in further research. Firstly, it is a study that is limited to only two social networks, Twitter and Instagram, and additional research using other social networks like Facebook or Tik Tok and other social media, including blogs, should be considered to analyze different age market segments. It should also be taken into consideration that social networks are constantly evolving, with varying user numbers and how they are used in each market segment. A further limitation present in this study is that although the research tool, Mabrian, has a robust database, it fails to provide complete information on months or quarters for some of the markets considered in the research. Data such as expenditure, flight reservation, and telephone behavior are not related or considered under other measuring criteria, making it almost impossible to determine how they correlate in this study.

Future research should consider tools like "Vivential Value" to analyze other elements considering the destination's online reputation. Further research lines should also consider analyzing the daily flux of different tourist profiles, considering geographical origin from data given by their smartphones, and how these data correlate with their expenditure, considering data given by their credit cards and the cash acquired from ATMs. This would allow for an analysis of the tourists that visit Lloret de Mar, their type of visit, the activities they engage in, and their expenditure data to plan and implement activities and policies that continue to close the gap between the projected and perceived image Lloret is achieving.

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