

Tourist information sources at different stages of the travel experience

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Abstract

Tourist destination managers must design effective communication strategies as part of their promotional tasks. In order to do so, destinations need to know what sources of information tourists actually use during the stages of a trip. Previous studies have partially addressed this issue but only used a limited list of sources analysed or only focused on three stages (pre-, during and post-). Our study considers a fourth stage –destination choice–, and also 27 sources of information were included in the questionnaires sent to our sample of analysis composed of 1,621 tourists from the four main countries visiting Spain: France, Germany, Italy and the United Kingdom. The results confirm the prevalence of Internet search engines for destination choice and trip preparation phases, but also point out to the importance of recommendations from friends and family in the destination choice stage, of maps and plans during the trip, and of Facebook in the post-trip stage. It is also shown that, among the official channels of the destinations, only the website stands out as one of the most consulted sources.

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Keywords

Tourism; Tourist destinations; Tourists; Habits; Destination marketing organizations; Webs; Social networks; Social media; Search engines; Information sources; Information search; Information seeking; Maps; *Facebook*.

1. Introduction

Tourism is an extremely important sector for the economy as its contribution accounts for 10.4% of world GDP, although this percentage varies greatly according to the country. Indeed, in some cases, it is far below that figure (5% for Russia) or far higher (around 20.6% for Thailand). For Spain, it accounts for 14.6% of GDP and is the third biggest sector behind trade and financial services. Also, calculations suggest that this contribution provides 14.7% of the country's jobs (*World Travel & Tourism Council*, 2019).

Destinations are considered by experts as being the “primary unit of study and management” of tourism (**Bornhorst; Ritchie; Sheehan**, 2010), even though they are formed by an “amalgam of a diverse and eclectic range of businesses and people” (**Pike; Page**, 2014). Indeed, for certain authors, the harmonisation of the various interests of the groups of stakeholders that comprise the tourist destination is one of the foremost challenges faced by the organisations responsible for the management of these destinations (**Morgan; Hastings; Pritchard**, 2012).

Tourist destinations have long become aware of the opportunity afforded by applying branding techniques to promote them, just as commercial product brands do, by using, for instance, segmentation techniques, positioning techniques, market studies, public relations, brand architecture management or image implementation and design, or loyalty strategies.

In order to carry out those tasks, among others, organizations responsible for the tourism promotion of the territories are set up, and they are often known by the abbreviation DMO, which stands for Destination Marketing Organization.

DMOs are particularly responsible for the communication of destinations using every technique and communication channel possible: traditional advertising, relations with the media, social media, sponsorship, use of celebrities, mobile marketing, events or websites (**Rovira et al.**, 2010).

However, it is the case that in recent years, communication of tourist destinations has gradually been steering away from conventional communication channels (advertisements on television, the radio or in the press; brochures; advertising in travel agencies) in order to heavily shore up its base using digital channels, primarily through official destination websites (**Pedraza-Jiménez et al.**, 2013), social media and mobile apps (**Fernández-Cavia et al.**, 2017).

This communicative migration unfolds in a market setting where international leisure trips have increased spectacularly, among other reasons due to (**Mckercher**, 1998; **Fernández-Cavia; Vinyals-Mirabent; López-Pérez**, 2013):

- the popularization of holiday travel,
- the ease of access to information via the Internet and
- reduced costs owing to the set-up of low-cost airlines.

It is for this reason that information search habits are essential in the process of selecting the tourist destination, particularly if it is the first time visiting the destination and not a return visit (**Ekinci; Sirakaya-Turk; Preciado**, 2013; **Llodrà-Riera et al.**, 2015). In this respect, specialist magazines, advertisements in the general media, brochures, travel agencies and recommendations from relatives or friends appear to have slipped in terms of relevance compared to the Internet (**Kim; Xiang; Fesenmaier**, 2015).

Some studies, however, suggest that the use of the Internet for planning leisure trips—even though it is the first source of information—is already close to saturation, while the use of comments from other travellers in social networks continues to grow in importance (**Xiang; Magnini; Fesenmaier**, 2015; **Paniagua; Huertas**, 2018).

Technology has also driven changes in travel behaviour, since tourists have learned, for example, to postpone important decisions until they are already at the destination, thanks to the greater accessibility of information, or to use in a specialized way the different channels and tools depending on the objective of communication (**Xiang; Magnini; Fesenmaier**, 2015).

It is, therefore, a research topic of outstanding relevance not only from the academic perspective, but also from the point of view of the professional management of tourist destinations. In this article we present an empirical study that describes the tourists' informational habits thanks to an online survey. Data help to reveal useful knowledge building upon extant literature (**Bieger; Laesser**, 2004; **Sparks; Pan**, 2009) about how actual and potential visitors make use of a whole host of sources of information to gain inspiration, explore, decide or comment about their trips.

“Tourists have learned to use in a specialized way the different channels and tools depending on the objective of communication”

2. Review of literature

In recent years, academic journals have published a large body of articles devoted to studying the impact of technologies and the Internet on tourism. The summaries drawn up by **Neuhofer, Buhalis and Ladkin** (2013); **Standing, Tang-Taye and Boyer** (2014); **Li, Robinson and Oriade** (2017) or **Navío-Marco, Ruiz-Gómez and Sevilla-Sevilla** (2018) are just some examples.

Generally speaking, these studies illustrate the heightened use made by the tourism sector of communication technologies (**Inversini; Cantoni; De-Pietro**, 2014), although it has also been demonstrated that the pace at which DMOs adapt to changes is highly varied (**Gretzel; Fesenmaier**, 2004; **Fernández-Cavia et al.**, 2017).

One of the preferred topics of study in terms of the impact of the Internet on tourism has been the search for information by travellers (**Standing; Tang-Taye; Boyer**, 2014; **Navío-Marco; Ruiz-Gómez; Sevilla-Sevilla**, 2018). **Fodness and Murray** (1999) proposed the first complete information search model, which considered the characteristics of tourists, the influences of the context and the characteristics of the product, the search results and three dimensions: spatial, temporal and operational. Since then, the theoretical model has hardly evolved, and only marginal modifications have been suggested (**Zarezadeh; Benckendorff; Gretzel**, 2019).

The search for information may be considered as an inner search (i.e., within an individual's memory) or an outer search (and here a broad host of sources are brought to the fore such as the media, guides, personal relationships and, of course, all the channels offered to us by communication technologies) (**Jacobsen; Munar**, 2012). This search for information is vital when it comes to deciding what destination the tourist will visit (**Xiang et al.**, 2015) and, as a result, DMOs devote a large part of their efforts and recourses to providing travellers with all the information they need in the most appealing, persuasive way possible and communicating with potential tourists when they are about to make decisions (**Kotoua; Ilkan**, 2017). Along these lines, new online channels –websites, social media, recommendation platforms, etc.– have become one of the main battlegrounds on which the struggle for perception of destinations and travel decisions is played out (**Ekinci; Sirakaya-Turk; Preciado**, 2013; **Llodrà-Riera et al.**, 2015). For **Coromina and Camprubí** (2016), there is an important difference between what they call 'active information search', which has search engines, official websites, tourism blogs and brochures as their favourite sources, and what they call 'passive search for information', which occurs mainly through personal recommendations from friends and family and through the media.

Fodness and Murray (1999) started in their pioneering study from a catalogue limited to only eleven sources of information, all of them personal or analogue. Other subsequent works have not been more exhaustive, and have only analysed a very small number of tourist information sources (**No; Kim**, 2015; **Coromina; Camprubí**, 2016).

Almeida-Santana and Moreno-Gil (2017) observed the relationship between destination loyalty and the use of fourteen sources of tourist information, and –among other conclusions– found that, for European tourists, the social networks most used in the trip preparation are *Wikipedia, Facebook* and *YouTube*.

Choi, Hickerson and Kerstetter (2018), while acknowledging that there is no solid conceptualization, in the field of study of tourism, on what should be considered as a source of information from a technological point of view, stressed that tourists tend to perceive the information provided by other tourists as more trustworthy than that provided by official sources dependent on DMOs. Their conclusions, nevertheless, contradict the results of **Lian and Yu** (2019), for whom both the official digital channels and the user-generated content enjoy a similar influence on the trip decision-making process. Although they point out that the high interaction and transparency that user-generated content provides cause tourists to have a greater tendency to receive content about the destination through this route.

They can also be found, among the latest published works, some that specifically focus on the particular use of mobile phones in the process of searching for tourist information. **Kang, Jodice and Norman** (2019), from a survey of 248 users, conclude that the use of mobile phones allows tourists to make travel more flexible, since they can make decisions once at the destination thanks to the ease of obtaining information anytime, anywhere. In their study, however, they asked only about the use of the smartphone before and during the trip, but not afterwards, for instance, to share content and experiences on social networks.

In their quantitative analysis, **Korneliusson and Greenacre** (2018) addressed the differing use tourists made of a small number of communication channels by country, but they did not use their own data; instead, they employed that provided by the *Flash Eurobarometer 258* which, despite incorporating a very high number of responses (one thousand respondents for each of the 27 countries represented in the sample), was only able to analyse data relating to a single question, which asked those surveyed to state what source of information they deemed most important when making a decision concerning their travel plans.

On account of the obvious limitations in previous papers, our study set the goal of conducting a much more in-depth analysis of the information sources that tourists employ. On the one hand, in an attempt to be more exhaustive (since 27 different sources of tourist information have been taken into account) and, on the other,

“ Our objective is to carry out a detailed analysis of the sources of information that tourists use ”

trying to be more detailed in the analysis (since all of them have been explored not only in the three classic stages of the trip –before, during and after–, but breaking down the first stage into two: destination choice and trip preparation).

The research questions that have guided this work are the following:

RQ1: What sources of information do tourists use on their trips?

RQ2: At what different times (destination choice, trip preparation, during the trip and after the trip) are those sources used?

3. Methodology

In order to study the information search habits of tourists when choosing a destination, a survey was designed which would be addressed to international travellers that had visited Spain in the last three years.

The specific aims of the survey were as follows:

- Analysing what the primary sources of information are which international tourists use when deciding on their holiday destination in Spain.
- Studying what sources of information are involved in the decision-making process and during the various stages of their trip (before, during and after).
- Identifying the characteristics relating to the use made of the sources of information on the Internet for the tourist’s trip to Spain (frequency, actions, usefulness).
- Identifying the characteristics relating to the form of accessing the sources of information on the Internet about the tourist destination in Spain (device, connection type, etc.).
- Investigating what variables determine greater use of one or other sources (experience as an Internet user, experience as a traveller, gender, nationality, socio-economic level).

To do so, a questionnaire was drawn up consisting of 36 questions organised into five main sections:

- reasons for visiting the country,
- sources of information,
- various stages of the trip,
- interaction with online communication channels and, of course,
- the socio-demographic profile of the individual surveyed.

The design of the questionnaire was carried out taking into account previous academic studies on the information habits of tourists (Bieger; Laesser, 2004; Kim; Xiang; Fesenmaier, 2015; Sparks; Pan, 2009), previously conducted market studies (Ipsos MediaCTlab, 2014), as well as the *European Social Survey* (2017).

Once the questionnaire was prepared, it was validated by various procedures.

- Firstly, a team of experts in survey design was hired to review both the formulation of the questions and the answers and scales used.
- Subsequently, it was translated into the four languages of the destination countries and the translations were tested for understanding with native speakers. These countries were the main in-bound markets for tourists to Spain, that is: The United Kingdom, France, Germany and Italy. Consequently, the questionnaire was translated into: English, French, German and Italian.
- Finally, the questionnaire was distributed among native speakers of each country to carry out a final validation of the formulation and the translation performed.

The questionnaire resulting from this procedure was sent to the company specialized in online market research, *Net-Quest*, which, after completing a last review, proceeded to program the survey. The programming process began on May 19, 2017 and, after various modifications and improvements by a team of experts, ended on November 14, 2017. As a result of the programming, the final version of the questionnaire was obtained in its four language versions. After two days of testing and correction of incidents, the final version was launched on November 16 in the four countries under study. In order to distribute the questionnaire, *Net-Quest* provided the foreign panels needed for the research.

The population under study were tourists of the four nationalities mentioned, older than 14, and who had visited Spain in the last three years. The panel closed on November 29, 2017 once the previously defined minimum sample had been obtained, which was 400 individuals per country. The distribution of the participants is specified in Table 1.

Table 1. Socio-demographic distribution of the sample

Total responses: 1.621		
Origin of respondents	United Kingdom	407
	France	405
	Germany	404
	Italy	405
Gender	Female	806
	Male	815
Age	14-24	263
	25-34	304
	35-44	310
	45-54	340
	+55	404

By country, the participation rate of the panels was between 24% and 37%, as can be seen in Table 2. We calculated the response rate by dividing all valid complete surveys by all those that participated (sum completed, filtered¹ and quota full²).

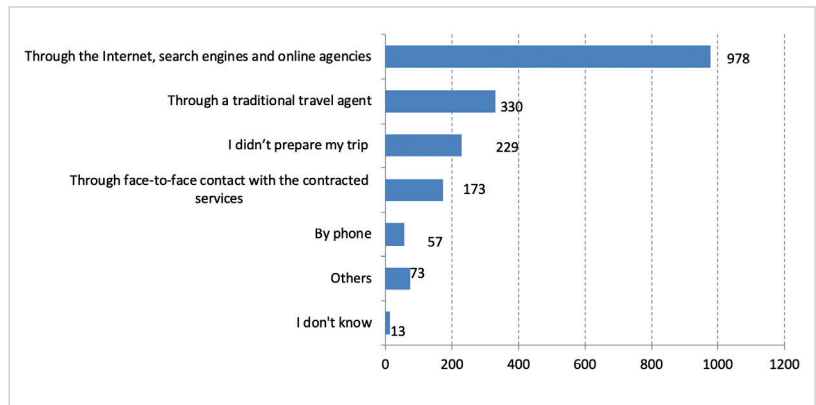
Table 2. Response rate by countries

Country	Invited	Participants	Filtered	Quota full	Completed	% participation
United Kingdom	10,108	2,429	1,217	179	442	24.03
France	8,591	2,292	1,108	224	458	26.67
Germany	8,973	2,830	1,668	179	434	31.53
Italy	8,008	2,978	1,299	326	455	37.18
Total	35,680	10,529	5,292	908	1,789	29.50

4. Results

The primary goal of the survey was to find out about the consumer habits and use of information made by tourists when choosing a destination or in the stages prior to, during and after their trip. If we centre in how tourists state that they prepare their trip, the first question included in the survey was the following: “How did you prepare your trip to Spain?”, for which seven options were offered and multiple responses were allowed (Graph 1).

We can clearly see that the Internet is the most highlighted option as more than half of respondents selected it, standing as the primary communication channel with which a tourist trip is prepared, as least when it comes to Spain among its main source markets. Travel agencies still play some role in the process, although to a lesser degree of importance, at least among tourists coming from the European countries analysed.



Graph 1. Ways in which foreign tourists prepared their trip to Spain
Multiple choice. Number of respondents: 1.621. Total number of answers: 1.853.

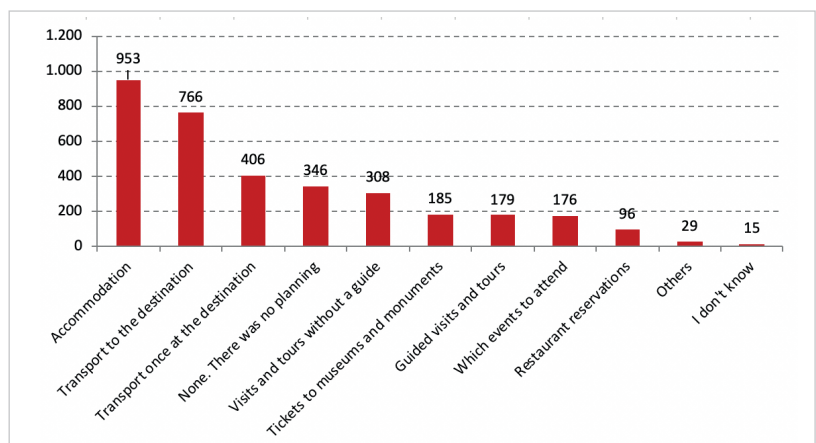
“The minimal importance of telephone communication is surprising because some years ago it would have accounted for a significantly larger percentage of use”

Nonetheless, the minimal importance of telephone communication is surprising because some years ago it would have accounted for a significantly larger percentage of use. These results confirm previous studies conducted along these lines and show the importance of online presence for businesses and tourist destinations.

If we focus on which aspects of the trip the tourists state they prepared in advance, we may also gain an acquaintance of which areas of business should preferably place more attention on their online positioning in order to meet travellers’ demands. To do this, the following question was included in the survey: “Which aspects of your trip did you plan before travelling?”. Eleven options were offered and multiple responses were allowed. The data is set out in Graph 2.

Graph 2 shows that the two foremost aspects for tourists in prior preparations for their trip are accommodation and transportation to the destination, as one would expect, which are the most common responses. The results achieved by both transportation at the destination and the preparation of unguided tours or visits are also interesting. Indeed, the tourist needs to spend more time and care to the planning of these tours or visits.

This importance of accommodation and transportation to the destination as the foremost aspects when preparing a tourist visit is backed up by the



Graph 2. Aspects of the trip prepared in advance
Multiple choice. Number of respondents: 1.621. Total number of answers: 3.459

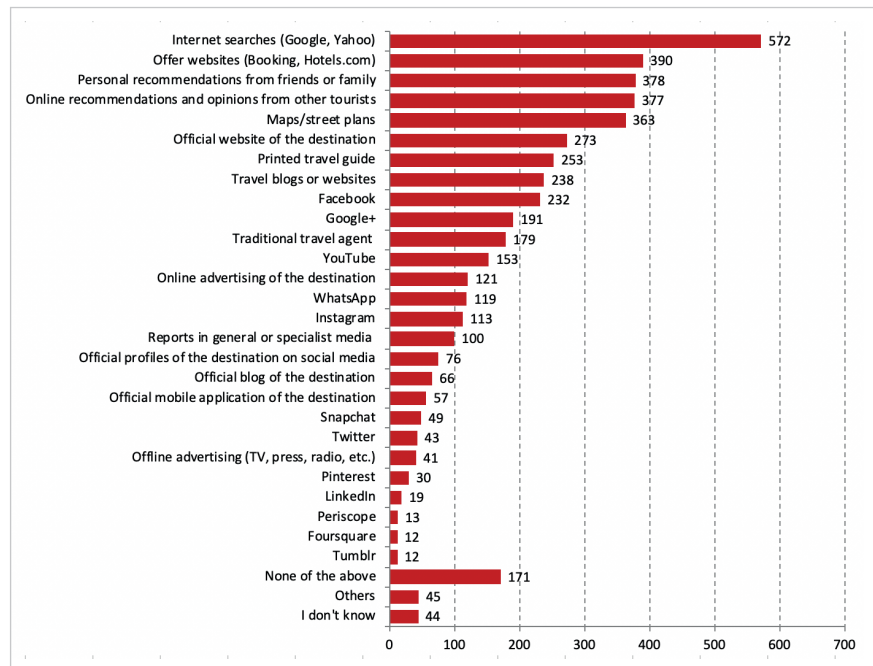
answers given in the survey to the question as to whether the Internet was used to book any type of service. In 787 cases (48% of the sample) it was stated that the Web was used to book accommodation, and in 561 cases (34%) it was stated that it was used in order to book transportation to the destination. It was also used in order to book transportation at the destination (267 cases), to buy tickets for museums or cultural institutions (189 cases), to make restaurant reservations (138 cases) or to secure tickets for events (also with 138 responses).

“The two foremost aspects for tourists in prior preparations for their trip are accommodation and transportation to the destination”

However, if we now focus more on use of the various information and communication channels by tourists, the questionnaire included the following question: “What options have you used at any point of your trip, whether it was to decide on the destination, look for information, prepare your trip to Spain or share your travel experiences?” where 27 options were offered, with the aim of being as comprehensive as possible, randomly presented for each subject and multiple responses were allowed (Graph 3).

Graph 3 shows that Internet search engines are the most commonly used communication tool by tourists by a long way, although only one third of those surveyed stated that they had used this method.

Secondly, booking websites stand out, along with personal recommendations, online recommendations and street maps and plans. Also, at the top of a third group of options is the official destination website. Social media accounted for a low number of responses, with *Facebook*, *Google+* and *YouTube* at the top of this group. Other options which should in theory be relevant, such as destination mobile apps, *Twitter* or traditional advertising, achieve a result that is negligible, at least in terms of conscious acknowledgment and in the statements by the subjects in the sample.



Graph 3. Communication tools used by tourists
Multiple choice. Number of respondents: 1.621. Total number of answers: 4.730

Certainly, the data seems to discourage efforts invested by many Spanish destinations into external advertising campaigns or into setting up and maintaining official profiles on *Twitter*, at least if what they seek to do is address an audience of current or potential tourists.

Thanks to the survey, we can specify our search somewhat more obtaining specific data in relation to which of these tools are used by tourists at each stage of their trip: the choice of destination, preparation for the trip, during the trip or after the trip.

Accordingly, we can see that at the time of the choice of specific destination to be visited, the most commonly used tool is the Internet search engine (308 responses), personal recommendations from family or friends (234 responses) and booking websites (187 responses). Preferences remain the same at the time of the preparation for the trip with the only difference being that recommendations from relatives are replaced by online recommendations (218 responses).

In the stage during the trip, it is noteworthy that the options change substantially. The information and communication tool stated to be most significantly used are street maps and plans (240 responses), followed by Internet search engines, with printed travel guides in third place (168 responses).

Lastly, the communication channels that are stated as being used in the stage after the trip are firstly one particular social media platform in this case: *Facebook* (65 responses), Internet search engines again (although less frequently, with 34 responses) and, surprisingly, *WhatsApp* (34 responses), although, as can be seen, the respondents stated that the use of these information and communication tools is far less common during the stage after the trip than in earlier stages (Table 2).

“Data seems to discourage efforts invested by many Spanish destinations into external advertising campaigns or into setting up and maintaining official profiles on *Twitter*”

Table 3. Communication channels most commonly used during the various stages of the trip

Destination choice		Preparing the trip		During the trip		After the trip	
Internet search engines	308	Internet search engines	376	Plans and maps	240	Facebook	65
Personal recommendations	234	Booking websites	285	Internet search engines	207	Internet search engines	34
Booking websites	187	Online recommendations	218	Travel guides	168	WhatsApp	34

Firstly, these data shows the prevalence throughout the process of a trip of a specific tool, the search engine, which only notably loses significance during the stage after the trip. Moreover, the still important role played by certain offline channels is also observed, for instance, recommendations from relatives and friends during the stage in which the destination is chosen and travel guides, plans and maps when the tourist is at the destination. Lastly, social media only appear to play a major role at the time of sharing travel experiences with online contacts.

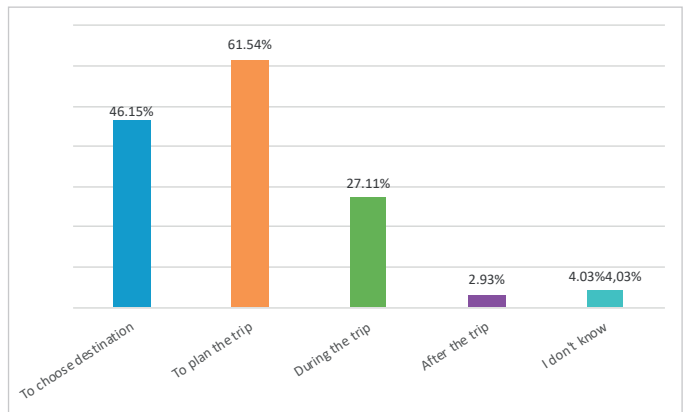
For each of the channels studied, the results of the questionnaire make it possible to analyse the moment when tourists do make use of the channel. As an example, we shall focus on four sources of information that show different behavioural patterns in this respect. Firstly, the official destination website –which, as we have seen, is the sixth most commonly used channel– is primarily browsed during the two initial stages: namely during the choice of destination and preparation for the trip (Graph 4).

The official destination website is also a source of information tourists resort to once at their destinations, throughout their trip, albeit to a lesser extent, and it is a channel that is virtually not used subsequently. This latter aspect reveals that efforts carried out formerly by certain DMOs in order to set up a forum on the destination websites for travellers to share their experiences turned out to be of very little interest. It is one further example of the trial and error strategy that commonly guides tourism institutions in the implementation of communication strategies.

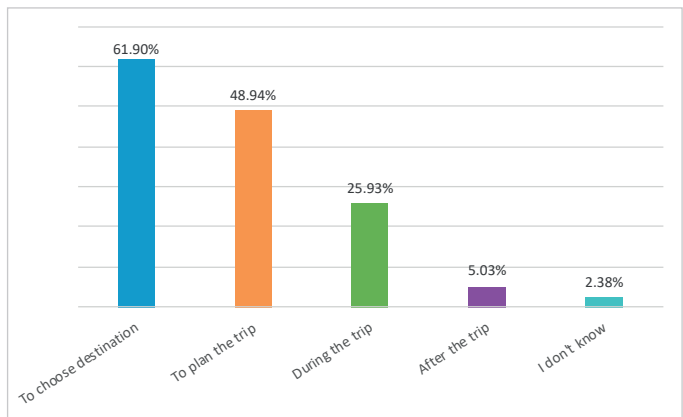
A similar behavioural pattern, albeit more focussed on the first stage (the choice of destination), is personal recommendations from friends and relatives. The influences of the closest social circle seem to have a greater impact when deciding where to travel to, although they are also important in the organisation and planning of the visit. However, they lose effect when the tourist is already at the destination. As was expected, they become irrelevant once the trip has ended (Graph 5).

It is worth recalling that personal recommendations constitute the third most common channel that tourists state they use. Accordingly, this word of mouth transfer of information in the most traditional sense still plays an essential role in tourism communication, which is especially important at the most critical time for destinations; namely, the choice of the place to be visited.

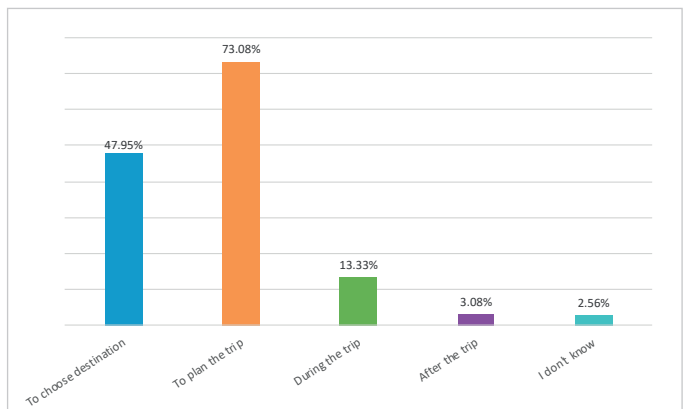
On the other hand, booking websites, which perform a significant role in present-day tourism communication, are most commonly used during the planning stage of the trip. It should be remembered that accommodation is the aspect that is most prepared in advance. Even so, the role of these platforms is also important when it comes to selecting the actual destination, at least according to what is revealed by the tourists surveyed (Graph 6).



Graph 4. Use of the official destination website at the various stages of the trip Multiple choice. Number of respondents: 273. Total number of answers: 387.



Graph 5. Use of personal recommendations from friends and relatives Multiple choice. Number of respondents: 378. Total number of answers: 545.



Graph 6. Use of booking websites (Booking, Hotels.com, etc.) Multiple choice. Number of respondents: 390. Total number of answers: 546.

This may point to the fact that a number of tourists decide where to travel to depending on offers and availability of accommodation according to what they are able to find online. As a result, booking websites would perform a significant function as the prescribers or recommenders of destinations which should be taken into consideration by tourism management leaders.

As expected, social media plays a different role. To be precise, tourists state that they use such media during the tourist experience, even though it does have an impact on inspiration for the trip, planning of it and the subsequent communication about it. Conventionally, researchers had emphasised the role of social media as a tool for sharing experiences upon returning home (Munar; Jacobsen, 2014; Martínez-Sala et al., 2019). However, our study reveals that Facebook is in fact a relevant channel throughout the stay at the destination (Graph 7).

This change of role and greater use of social media during the trip may be due to the generalization of roaming in Europe, which allows mobile devices to go online at any time for the same price as that applicable in the country of origin.

This phenomenon has had a huge influence on the use of online sources of information by tourists as it enables access to the Internet everywhere, encouraging its use. To be precise, almost four in every five tourists state they logged onto the Internet during the trip, which helps to explain –at least in part– why seven of the ten most widely used communication channels are online ones (Graph 8).

In order to discover what type of device tourists use to go online during the trip we included the question “What device did you use to log onto the Internet during your trip?”, in which five possible options were suggested and multiple responses were allowed.

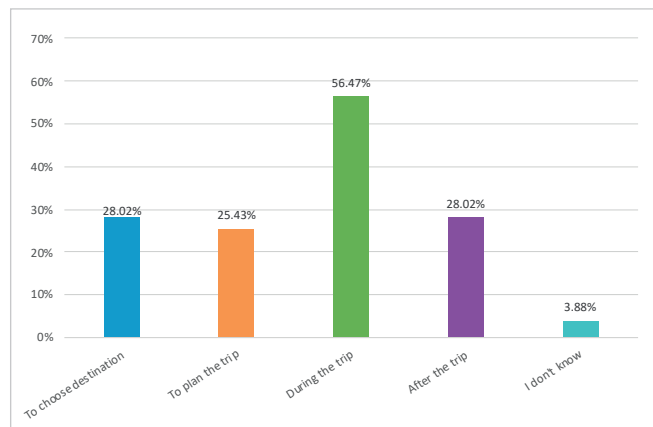
The data obtained shows very clearly that the mobile telephone is the leading device and has undoubtedly become the key player in tourism communication at destinations (Graph 9).

Nevertheless, we should recall that this prominence of smartphones does not take place in keeping with the generalization of the use of official destination mobile apps, which are only used by 3.5% of those surveyed.

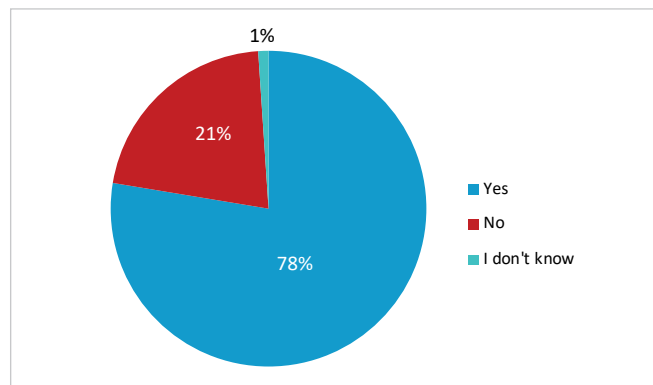
5. Discussion and conclusions

This research provides data that help to understand the informational habits of tourists, especially in relation to their information needs and the sources they use to satisfy them. The discriminated analysis of informational habits based on four different stages of the trip, compared to the three traditionally studied (Neuhofner; Buhalis; Ladkin, 2013), and the international sample based on real tourists who have recently travelled, have been key to identifying informational behaviours that had gone unnoticed so far.

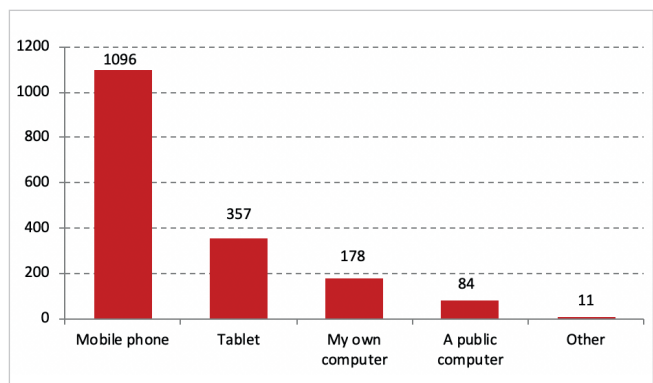
In line with what was pointed out in previous research, the Internet is consolidated as the main channel of tourist information (Ekinci; Sirakaya-Turk; Preciado, 2013; Llodrà-Riera et al., 2015). The data collected, in the line of previous works (Xiang; Magnini; Fesenmaier, 2015; Paniagua; Huertas, 2018) confirm the primacy of the use, when deciding on the destination or planning the



Graph 7. Use of Facebook
Multiple choice. Number of respondents: 232. Total number of answers: 329.



Graph 8. “Did you log onto the Internet during your trip?”
Number of respondents: 1.621



Graph 9. Type of device used to go online during the trip
Multiple choice. Number of respondents: 1.258. Total number of answers: 1.726

“ Although the use of the Internet dominates informational habits at all the stages of the trip, this study reveals its, sometimes omitted, influence during the course of the tourist experience ”

trip, of the information tools that the Internet provides, as more than half of the respondents say they have used them to prepare their trip.

Furthermore, and although the use of the Internet dominates informational habits at all the stages of the trip, this study reveals its, sometimes omitted, influence during the course of the tourist experience. Previous research, for example, highlighted the use of online tools, such as social networks, to share the tourist experience after the trip (Munar; Jacobsen, 2014); in turn, our study clearly indicates that some of these tools, like *Facebook*, are used during the trip.

Maps emerge as the most used tool during the trip, surpassing even online search engines

The data reveals that 4 out of 5 tourists declare they were connected during the trip, and that, of these, 87% used the smartphone at some point, confirming the central role that these devices currently play during the tourist experience (Kang; Jodice; Norman, 2020).

At this same stage, the use of maps and plans, and printed guides also stands out. On the one hand, maps emerge as the most used tool during the trip, surpassing even online search engines. This result is especially revealing, considering that this tool has been omitted in previous studies on informational habits (Korneliusen; Greenacre, 2018; Xiang *et al.*, 2015). On the other hand, previous research pointing to the potential of printed tourist guides to generate a memorable image of the destination (Kim; Yoon, 2013; Hunter, 2012; 2016), is now also reinforced by the findings of this study, which highlights the influence and high use of printed guides during the trip.

It is key, therefore, that both Destination Marketing Organizations and other actors in the tourism industry take into account these sources, which, although they belong to the group of traditional tools used in tourism promotion, are still key to direct tourists *in situ* towards the desired attractions and services.

Another great finding of the study emerges from the distinction between the destination choice and preparation stages, studied together so far (Gretzel; Fesenmaier; O'Leary, 2006). This decision has been vital to identify that, in fact, there is a differentiated information consumption behaviour in these stages. For example, although previous research pointed to the loss of relevance of personal recommendations (Kim; Xiang; Fesenmaier, 2015), our study has revealed that, although this trend is confirmed in the preparatory phase of the trip due to the rise of online recommendations, personal recommendations remain as the second most relevant source during the destination choice process.

However, on the other side of the scale we find that, despite the efforts of the DMOs in order to position the official information channels of their destinations, they are not yet among the most used; only the official website manages to rank sixth. In particular, it should be noted that its use is concentrated in the destination choice and preparation phases, data that fits with the low results of these websites when it comes to promoting interactivity and sharing of the tourist experience (Fernández-Cavia; Vinyals-Mirabent; López-Pérez, 2013). Official profiles of the destination on social networks do not appear until the seventeenth position, downplaying studies such as those of Almeida-Santana and Moreno-Gil (2017) that point to *Wikipedia*, *Facebook* and *YouTube* as the most used social networks in the preparation for the trip.

For its part, the official mobile applications are in 19th place, with a rather residual importance. And that, despite the intensive use of the smartphone that has been confirmed in our study.

This is also the case with travel agencies which, at least according to the memories of the German, British, French and Italian tourists surveyed, have lost substantial importance in the same way that reports in specialist magazines and traditional advertising.

To conclude, we want to highlight the key role played by Internet search engines in the destination choice and preparation phases; that of the maps and plans during the trip; and that of *Facebook* in the post-trip stage. Thus, the findings of this study not only confirm some tendencies identified in previous works, but also reveal tourists' informational habits that had gone unnoticed until now. Also, at a professional level, the findings will be of great help to Destination Marketing Organizations, in order to better know which of these tools tourists use, how they use them, at what time, and for what purposes.

We highlight the key role played by Internet search engines in the destination choice and preparation phases; that of the maps and plans during the trip; and that of *Facebook* in the post-trip stage

6. Notes

1. The questionnaires could be filtered either by *ISO*, since a control of the information on sex and age of each panelist was carried out, in such a way that were discarded those cases in which the data provided in the survey were not consistent with the data available in the database; or by age, country, nationality, or for not having visited Spain.
2. They correspond to the surveys discarded for having already obtained the number of responses set by quota for that profile. Cases discarded in the survey are included along with cases that tried to access the survey when their access had already been closed.

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