

TOURISM PROMOTION AND THE (RE) FUNCTIONALIZATION OF INFORMATION OFFICES: THE CASE OF SERRA DA ESTRELA

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Abstract

Tourist information offices, whose mission of spreading information and supporting tourism is becoming more demanding, are under pressure to readjust in order to become structures that provide high quality information. A change from "physical access" to "digital access" is being witnessed that threatens traditional structures for the provision of information. This fact implies that the structures must be (re)functionalized in order to promote more social contact with tourists and to offer services other than the simple giving of information. This study seeks to characterize the tourist information offices of the Serra da Estrela area, to inquire about their role as providers of space in which tourists can obtain information, and to assess their skills in relation to the behaviour and requirements of tourists in the twenty-first century, namely the adaptation to new communication paradigms in tourism.

Keywords: *Tourist Information, Tourist Information Offices, Serra da Estrela, Web 2.0.*

Resumen

Las oficinas de turismo, cuya misión de difusión de la información y apoyo al turismo se está volviendo cada vez más exigente, están bajo presión para reajustarse de forma a integrarse en estructuras de promoción de la información, cada vez más cualificadas. Se está atravesando un cambio del "acceso físico" por el "acceso digital" que amenaza las estructuras tradicionales de promoción, lo que implica su (re) funcionalización, de forma a promover un contacto social con los turistas y ofrecer servicios que van más allá de la información. Este estudio busca caracterizar las oficinas de turismo del destino Serra da Estrela, cuestionar su papel como promotores de espacios de información turística, y evaluar sus habilidades hacia los comportamientos y las

necesidades del turismo en el siglo XXI, en particular en lo que se refiere a la adaptación a los nuevos paradigmas de la comunicación en turismo.

Palabras clave: *Información Turística, Oficinas de Turismo, Serra da Estrela, Web 2.0.*

Introduction

A tourist seeks access to several levels of information, such as prior knowledge of his destination and details to enable him to collect data to arrange his stay and his activities so that he can develop an interaction with the territory and its resources.

Tourist information offices should offer reliable information in order to provide reassurance and to improve the tourism product. Thus, it is considered that the main purpose of these offices is to give the best information possible and to be accessible to everyone, which will facilitate visits to the tourism destination. The information represents the contents of the communication process between the target and the tourist, and is a critical aspect of his decision to stay, given the scope of his known activities or those activities that he may develop.

Therefore tourist information offices, whose mission of spreading information and supporting tourism is becoming more demanding, are under pressure to change in order to improve the way in which they provide information. In the online digital dimension, a place for experimenting must be associated with these offices, where the information conveyed intersects with local products and the promotion of experiences and tourism facilities. Services should be available so that the stay is enthralling.

Tourist information, in addition to its role in the promotion of tourist destinations, has a major influence in the creation of the image of the destination, which implies that the information is a critical factor in describing the destination, in the way the description spreads and in whether the destination appears attractive. Access to tourist information has been undergoing significant changes over the past two decades due to the massive use of the Internet and, in particular, the underlying technologies of Web 2.0. These technologies foster a trend towards a demand that envisages the presentation of data online and in different formats, which facilitates the obtaining of different and complementary information about tourist destinations.

We are witnessing a change from "physical access" to "digital access" that threatens the traditional structures for the provision of information, and this implies that these structures need to be (re)functionalized, promoting a more socializing contact with tourists, offering services that go beyond information and providing themselves with the means of developing the promotion of the destination.

So this study seeks to characterize the tourist information offices of the Serra da Estrela area, as defined by the Observatory for Tourism of Serra da Estrela (OTSE) (Roque, Fernandes, Sardo, et al. 2012), inquiring about their roles as promoters of tourism information spaces, and assessing their skills relating to the behaviour and

requirements of tourists in the twenty-first century, namely regarding their adaptation to new communication paradigms in tourism.

The different types of tourism information

Currently, competition between destinations is stronger than ever. Although increasing tourist flows to a destination is always the main goal, nowadays, due to several factors including the financial crisis that affects a considerable number of, mainly European, countries, the goal is also to maintain the existing tourist flows (Roque, Fernandes, & Raposo 2012). In this sense, one of the requirements and, at the same time, one of the most important tasks for the competitiveness of destinations, in order to maintain or even increase the influx of tourists, is to achieve high levels of cooperation and coordination among different stakeholders. This is sometimes difficult due to their overlapping and conflicting interests (Wang 2008). However, tourists are not concerned with these issues, but seek more flexible ways to organize their travel, and are increasingly more demanding in relation to the information provided by destinations (Chen & Sheldon 1997).

Some authors have shown that the Internet is currently the most important and relevant information source used by tourists (Fu Tsang, Lai, & Law 2010; Jani, Jang, & Hwang 2011). The Internet has reshaped how information related to tourism is distributed and how people plan their travel (Buhalis & Law 2008). In turn, destinations are also directly involved in this process of change, because their competitiveness is directly related to their ability to meet the information needs of both the local stakeholders and the tourists/visitors through technology-based applications.

The use of social media websites and search engines has become a major trend in finding tourist information on the web (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). The social media websites, with their various forms of User Generated Content (UGC) such as blogs, wikis, social networks, collaborative tagging and file-sharing (websites like YouTube¹ and Flickr²), have gained great popularity for use by online tourists (Gretzel 2006; Pan, MacLaurin, & Crofts 2007). Many of these social media websites allow consumers to post and share their comments, opinions and personal experiences related to travel, and this provides information to others (Xiang & Gretzel 2010). This supports the theory of Friedman (2007) that "the world is flat", because consumers are gaining more power in determining the production and distribution of information with the increasing ease of Internet access.

The main objective of the demand for tourist information is to decrease the risk of wasting time and money (Gitelson & Crompton 1983). The information is needed to select the destination to visit and to make decisions about plans such as (i)

¹ <http://www.youtube.com/>

² <http://www.flickr.com/>

accommodation, (ii) transportation, and (iii) places to visit, among other things (Perdue 1985). During the journey phase, tourists are under pressure to make decisions, because time is short and is consequently very valuable (Gursoy & McCleary 2004).

Tourist information has been categorized in several ways. One possible categorization is used by Milheiro (2006), who considers three different types of tourist information: (i) nature (static or dynamic), (ii) time horizon (before and during the trip) and (iii) promoting entity (public or private).

In terms of nature, static tourist information is understood as information that only suffers significant changes over extended periods of time (maps, routes, etc.). Dynamic tourist information is understood as information that can change significantly over short periods of time, such as transport timetables, availability of attractions, pricing, etc.; it requires an extraordinary effort to ensure the updating and usefulness of this information.

As to time horizon, there are two distinct phases in the use of information: the phase prior to the visit and the phase during the visit. The information used during the phase before the trip relates to planning and decision-making, while in the phase during the trip the information can determine tourists' travel behaviour. It is important to have detailed knowledge of tourists' information needs, and to make sources of information available at the right time and according to their needs (Bieger & Laesser 2001).

As for the promoting entity, public bodies normally produce general information about destinations, their facilities and the travel companies operating there, but they make this information as unbiased as possible. On the contrary, information produced by private entities has a business purpose, and is highly oriented towards promoting a product or brand. Organizations, whether public or private, should monitor changes in tourists' information needs, or their communications strategy will completely fail (Gursoy & McCleary 2004).

Another categorization for the information generated by and for tourism is the one defined by Nascimento and Silva (2008). This divides the information into three basic types: (i) information for business management (which assists with the development of companies' activities related to tourism), (ii) information to promote tourism and (iii) information for tourists (which satisfies tourists' information needs during their stay in the destination) (Gohr, Santos, & Veiga 2009).

These two categorizations of information have points in common, and so this study will be based on a combination of the two approaches. In the categorization of Nascimento and Silva (2008), the analysis will focus primarily on the latter category, as we will look at the information that tourists need during the course of their trip; we will integrate into this two of the categories defined by Sheldon (1997, cited by Milheiro (2006)): the nature of the information (both static and dynamic) and the promoting entity (basically public bodies).

The importance of information in the context of tourism and the role of information offices

Information is one of the most important aspects in the promotion of tourism destinations and products. Tour operators have been giving particular attention to information, in diverse and increasingly sophisticated ways and media, in order to promote tourism and create favourable conditions to reach potential visitors. In addition to a role in the promotion of a tourist destination, tourist information has a major influence in the creation of its image (O'Leary & Deegan 2005), implying that it stands out as a critical factor in the way the destination is promoted and in whether the destination can appear attractive. The increasing incorporation and promotion of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) means that the promotion of tourist destinations uses more digital media and generates composite information, to help produce different and complementary pieces of information that stimulate tourists' demands and give them a deeper knowledge of the destination. Tourists demand access to levels of information that are increasingly diverse, and that allow them to have prior knowledge of their destination or enable them to collect data that will help them to plan their stay and the activities they may do.

It should be noted that the need to search for information is associated with risks – financial and emotional – for the consumer, and that the identities of the information providers and the entities that guarantee the reliability of the information are critical in whether the tourist decides to make the trip, how long he decides to stay, and also the purchase of goods and services.

The tourism industry generates a large amount of information that has a strategic value and importance in the business of tourism. Therefore, information should be treated as an element of strategy and organizational/institutional planning. In order for this tourism system to operate, there is an increasing requirement for synergies between the various institutions – public and private – that incorporate and promote information and communication flows, and these synergies will satisfy the interests of tourists within the tourism system.

It appears that tourists tend to request more information through those channels that are more varied and that are also perceived as more valid (Middleton & Clarke 2001). As a result, tourism information stands out as a marketing tool that can affect the competitive advantage of a destination (Kiriakou 2006) and, at the same time, can create basic conditions suitable to allow the local authorities to plan tourism development and disseminate strategic information to various actors in the tourism system: hotels, restaurants, leisure and recreation facilities and others.

In this context, both the quality of tourist information and the ability to use the appropriate means to provide that information bring benefits to businesses and commercial activity in the area and increase tourist expenditure, but are also a way of promoting local and regional development by advertising the attractions of the area, leading to the expansion of services that support tourism (Kiriakou 2006), with all the recognized economic and social implications of tourism. It should be noted that tourist information must benefit and serve the local residents and, simultaneously, provide a

basis of knowledge for visitors, who can access the resources and services to take advantage of the tourism facilities.

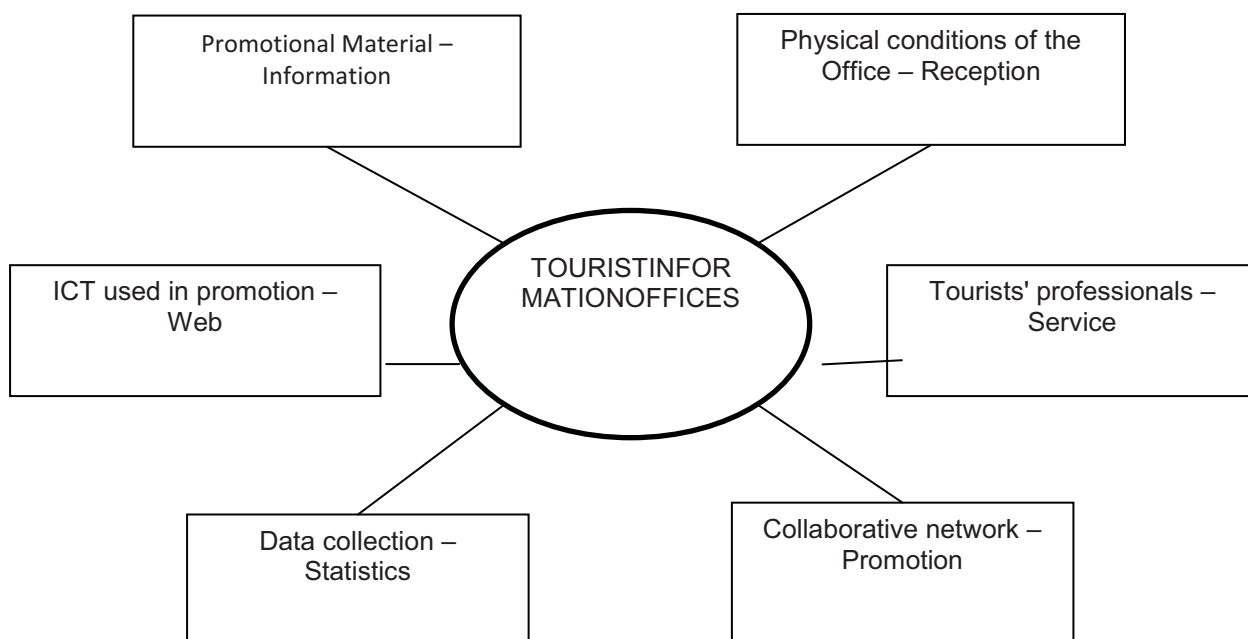
Tourist information offices, whose mission of disseminating information and supporting tourism is proving to be increasingly more demanding, are under pressure to change in order to become structures that disseminate information that is of a higher quality. In terms of disseminating information through documents (physical and digital), these offices should be places where the information is conveyed together with products from the region and tourist facilities and services, encouraging people to stay.

Tourist information offices should provide reliable information in order to give reassurance and to improve the tourists' experience. Thus it is considered that the main purpose of these offices is to give the best possible information and to be accessible to all, which will facilitate visits to the tourist destination. Information represents the contents of the communication process between the destination and the tourist, and is a critical aspect of a decision to stay, given the known scope of the tourist's activities or those activities that he may develop. As Middleton (2002) stated, tourism information is a fully market-based provision of information, which means that tourism information offices influence the formation of the tourism product and, as such, whether tourists stay or return, as well as the conception that they develop about the destination—its image.

It should be noted that tourist information offices are mainly the responsibility of the public sector, and fit into the tourism system as part of the infrastructure needed by a destination to meet tourists' demands and to disseminate information about potential local facilities (Beni 2003). Tourist information offices have responsibility for the information that supports tourists' visits. Their main functions are: to promote the destination, to provide promotional material for tourists, to promote services, to encourage reservations, to arrange tours and itineraries, to promote products, to gather information about demand, to archive material, to structure information in support of decisions, and to organize statistics. Thus, these functions of data collection and statistical systems can develop critical information in support of decisions and policy and the formulation of investment in tourism, by identifying a tourist profile according to trends in demand and interests that are expressed.

For the efficient performance of the functions of a tourism information office, there is a need to have a team of employees who perceive the current characteristics of tourism and who promote high quality and rigorous procedures for working with visitors. There is also a need for responsible people to work in planning and tourism development, based on performance criteria and methodologies that enhance and promote the destination (Figure 1). In addition to human resources, other aspects like physical structure, office equipment, the type of information provided, the channels used to disseminate the information, the experiences available and the technologies used become determining factors.

Figure 1. Functional structure of the Tourist Information Offices



Tourist information offices should also play a role, within the context of the administration to which they belong, that extends beyond the pure tasks of providing information and supporting tourists. These should be highlighted: (1) the management and promotion of target attractions; (2) the management and planning of some tourism support infrastructure; and (3) investigations of the tourism market and how it can be expanded.

Information systems that have the capability to store, manage and present information according to the needs of each party involved in tourism present competitive advantages for all decision-makers involved in the economic sector, from the tourist to organizations related to tourism.

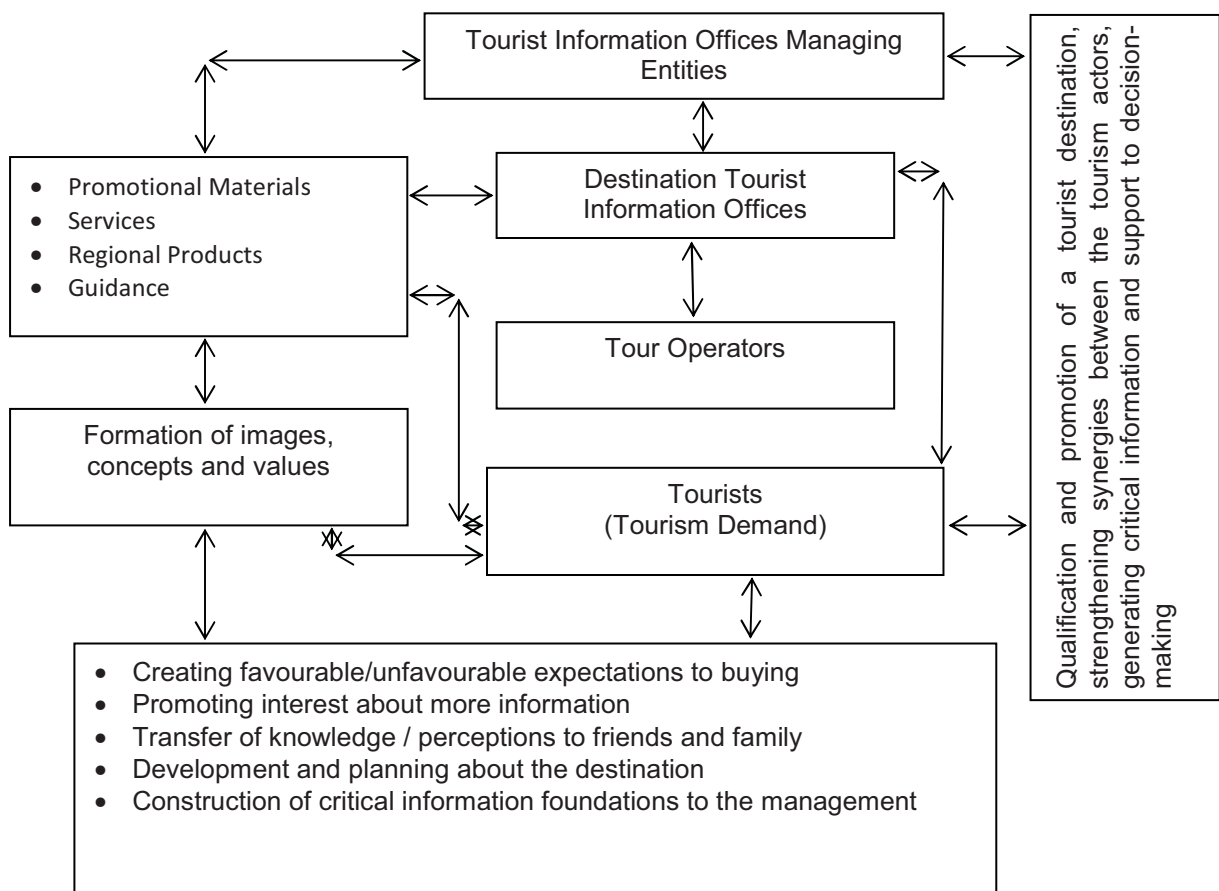
According to Alén González, Fraiz Brea, and Rodríguez Comesaña (2009), if visitors are to have a satisfactory experience in a tourism information office it is crucial that qualified professionals are present, and so the provision of promotional material, products, or other items of information without human intervention is not enough. This consideration has particular implications for offices that have few staff or that are basically self-managed. The authors highlight the importance, from a marketing perspective, of access to information outside office working hours, since many visitors may reach the destination outside opening hours, looking for information about the area and the services they seek (hotels, restaurants, museums...). If the information is not available or accessible, visitors will not only considerably limit the time they spend in the region, but they will neither visit nor receive a good image of the attraction and what it has to offer. It appears that a greater distance between home and destination may increase the need for information, the amount of time needed for planning and

the duration of the stay, and this requires more information and a more detailed knowledge of the services to be used and the places to be visited.

It has been noted that the information gathered in tourist information offices can influence both current and future travel options for those who gather the information or their social circle. Thus, a publication/document/guide obtained at a tourism information office during a trip can be used as a primary source of information to schedule upcoming trips, or can even be used by others, if its quality is recognized and the experience was rewarding.

It has been shown by (Alén González et al. 2009; Buhalis 1998; Fesenmaier 1994) that the information obtained from tourist information offices influences visitors' behaviour, because it appears that it supports the decisions about which place to visit, and the time and money to be spent at the destination, because of the induced motivation and knowledge of the leisure possibilities. In this context, the smaller the degree of travel planning, the greater the influence of the information on tourist activities that is obtained at the destination (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Role of the Tourist Information Offices in destination qualification



It also appears that, at the tourism destination level, the use of tourist information offices positively affects the duration of the journey, as well as having an influence on

future travels. In this context, the information given in these places is effective in prolonging visitors' stay (Fesenmaier, 1994; Kiriakou, 2006), as well as disseminating information throughout the region and allowing the planning of activities within the region. Apart from this, tourist information offices can increase the length of stay at the tourism destination, and can foster in visitors the desire to perform some activities (cultural visits, sports practices, gastronomic experiences, among others) that were not originally planned, which increases the economic benefits to the destination and promotes the development of complementary products in addition to the interests that had already been shown.

According to Buhalis (2000), but they will neither visit nor receive a good is its image. The image is the set of expectations and perceptions that the potential visitor has of the destination. Information conveyed by companies (airlines, hotels and travel agencies), along with information from friends, helps to develop that image. Managing the resources of a destination sustainable has become one of the most important elements of tourism development strategies, involving the coordination of resources and practices in harmony with environmental conditions and cultural references.

The image of the destination and its ability to attract visitors, according to Kastenholtz (2002), is formed via the acquisition and processing of information with the purpose of, eventually, giving priority to an image or changing its contents. Image formation is close to the process of perception, and so the quality of information, understood as technical accuracy, visual quality and detail of explanations, is crucial. The visitor appreciates receiving, from technical or qualified entities, recommendations/guidelines about the places to be visited, the identity and quality of its products and services and the best ways to access these. According to Aln Gonzlez et al. (2009), it is important that the visitor leaves the tourism information office with high quality written information that is plentiful, well presented and illustrated with great detail. The information should feature the cultural, sporting and recreational activities on offer, the gastronomy, and the areas and places of interest. Maps and details about the places and services, to enable them to be located easily and to indicate how access to them can be obtained, should also be provided.

Fodness and Murray (1999) split the process in which tourists seek information on travelling into three: spatial searches, time searches and operational searches. Space is divided into internal and external space, with internal space being in the person's heart. An external spatial search is carried out using outside sources of information. Time searches are also divided into two: collecting information to be used at the time it is collected and collecting data to be stored in order to be used in the future. An operational search concerns a level of information that can be decisive or can contribute to decision-making.

Buhalis (2003) states that the greater the degree of risk perceived before the acquisition of a product/service, the more likely it is that the consumer will search for information about the product or service. Consumers seeking information in order to have a proper enjoyment of the products/services that they desire and have identified as being of interest or relevance minimize the gap between their expectations and their perception of risk.

For a tourist information office to be efficient, it has to fulfil several requirements. In addition to having adequate information and human resources, it must have an appropriate location, so that visitors can easily access it. They must be able to get hold of a set of documentary and non-documentary information that provides adequate knowledge of the destination, allows them to gain confidence in their acquisition and enjoyment of products, and conquers them as a messenger in their social relations.

OTSE territory

The importance of tourism as a driving force of socio-economic structures in regions is now a fully proved fact. The growth and spatial diffusion of tourism has been one of the most remarkable results of people's mobility and higher standard of living, within the areas involved in and appropriate for tourism, which are increasingly diverse. The mountain of Serra da Estrela has been linked, from the beginning, with the tourism phenomenon, due to the area it gives for recreation and leisure and its natural qualities. The presence of a strong ecological component, the different activities possible throughout the year, the development of sports, the richness of its cultural heritage, the integrity of its forest and water resources and the expansion of its hotels and sport and recreation facilities have increased its appeal. It has increasingly assumed the role of a great alternative to coastal tourism, especially in the winter period (Perlis 2002).

Serra da Estrela is the most prominent central Lusitanian ridge and the highest and most famous mountain of mainland Portugal. It is 1,993 metres at its highest point and has glacial features that are not found elsewhere in the country. It has a unique geomorphological structure, composed of a set of elements whose size, shape and geology create bioclimatic levels with different types and intensities of occupation. The strong climatic constraints have led to a seasonal variety of traditional activities, and they allow the development of various sports and winter activities associated with the topography and the presence of snow. The conditions created by forests, water resources and the cultural heritage have meant that the area has become a major non-coastal regional tourist destination.

To define the area for our observations, we considered, in addition to altitude, differences in geographic scope in geomorphological terms, forms of land use, population, population density and productive system. This allowed us to include or exclude areas to create a consistent region in relation to neighbouring areas, keeping the county as a unit of spatial cohesion. In this sense, we have tried to analyse and interpret the biophysical elements that allow us to delimit a specific area, in order to clarify our definition of the territory of Serra da Estrela (Roque, Fernandes, Sardo, et al. 2012).

In practice this definition of the territory of Serra da Estrela, an active territory for the OTSE, was based on three factors: the inclusion of all the counties that are a part of the

Natural Park of Serra da Estrela; the inclusion of three municipalities of the NUTS³ III of Serra da Estrela; and the inclusion of those municipalities whose altitude and ways of life establish a relationship with mountainous areas, and, in this case, with Serra da Estrela. It should be clear that any definition always causes some doubts, but that this definition necessarily had to be considered due to the specific concentration on the mountain territory; we considered the geomorphology and proximity to the central massif, the biophysical conditions and the way of life as factors that brought these municipalities in through this approach. Thus the counties of Belmonte, Celorico da Beira, Covilhã, Fornos de Algodres, Gouveia, Guarda, Manteigas, Oliveira do Hospital and Seia were deemed to form the territory of Serra da Estrela.

Meaning and functions of Tourist Information Offices in Serra da Estrela; Methodology and analysis

In order to perform an initial characterization and exploratory analysis of the tourist information offices within the territory of OTSE, a form was developed to obtain information about them. The form covered the various factors and conditions related to the mission of the provision of information and support to tourism, which currently, as was previously stated, has such a wide-ranging and demanding role.

This survey was conducted in person by a questionnaire given by OTSE team members to those responsible for twelve tourist information offices in the OTSE region, in the period between January 28 and February 8, 2013. Through this inquiry process of obtaining data, we sought to understand the conditions in which the tourist information offices operate, and inquire about the methods that are being developed, in terms of the performance of their duties. Thus, we sought to detect the main characteristics of the operation, services and skills, as well as the weaknesses or shortcomings that are highlighted in the structure and in the ways of communicating and of promoting Serra da Estrela as a destination. In this way we can contribute to possible ways of implementing improvements and, as a result, we now describe the main results obtained via the questionnaire.

The twelve tourist information offices, covering the nine municipalities included in the study (OTSE territory), responded to the questionnaire in full, making it clear that they are all part of public sector entities, including municipalities (councils or municipal bodies) and regional tourism entities such as the Centro Tourism and the Serra da Estrela Tourism (Table 1).

Table 1. Identification of Tourist Information Offices

³Nomenclature of Territorial Units for Statistics or NUTS is the nomenclature that defines the sub-regional areas into which a country is divided.

Tourist Information Office	Promoting Entity	Municipality
Belmonte	Empresa Municipal de Promoção e Desenvolvimento Social do Concelho de Belmonte (EMPDS)	Belmonte
Celorico da Beira	Entidade Turismo Serra da Estrela	Celorico da Beira
Covilhã	Entidade Turismo Serra da Estrela	Covilhã
Fornos de Algodres	Câmara Municipal de Fornos de Algodres	Fornos de Algodres
Gouveia	Empresa Municipal - Desporto, Lazer e Cultura de Gouveia (DLCG)	Gouveia
Guarda	Câmara Municipal da Guarda	Guarda
Linhares da Beira	Câmara Municipal de Celorico da Beira	Celorico da Beira
Loriga	Junta de Freguesia de Loriga	Seia
Manteigas	Entidade Turismo Serra da Estrela	Manteigas
Oliveira do Hospital	Turismo do Centro de Portugal (in partnership with Câmara Municipal de Oliveira do Hospital)	Oliveira do Hospital
Sabugueiro (<i>closed</i>)	Câmara Municipal de Seia	Seia
Seia	Câmara Municipal de Seia	Seia
Torre	Entidade Turismo Serra da Estrela	Seia

The buildings where the tourist information offices are located are mostly (83%) independent or non-integrated, being autonomous physical structures that do not share functions with other entities or spaces. In area they range between 24 m² and 282 m², corresponding to an average area of 91.4 m² with a standard deviation of 75.8. It is also noteworthy that only four (33%) of the tourist information offices are accessible to people with disabilities. In addition, eight (67%) of the tourist information offices have parking places, and eleven (92%) have identification in the building. Regarding signs and maps for the tourism information office, seven offices (55%) report that these exist in the surrounding area.

The majority (55%) of the tourist information offices have opening hours which, though they are not homogeneous, cover every day of the week, including weekends and some holidays. However, it appears that there is one tourist office that is closed on weekends and holidays, one that is closed on Sundays and holidays, one that is closed on Sundays and two others that are only closed on Sunday afternoons.

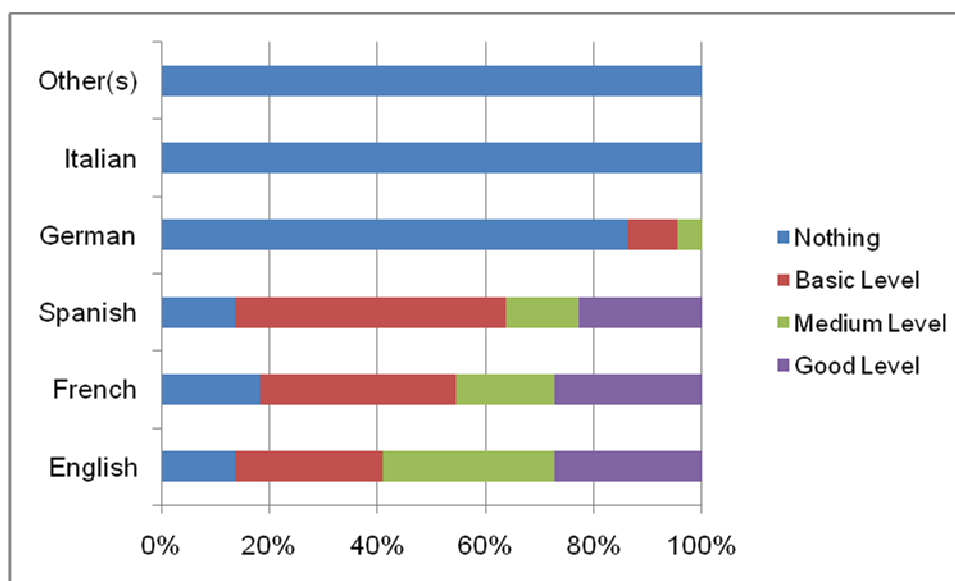
In terms of human resources, it was found that 75% of those responsible for the tourist information offices also work in the reception and, in terms of education, 55% have a graduate degree, 18% secondary education and 27% basic education (Table 2). In general terms, the tourist information offices in the study have between one and seven employees, and six (50%) have only one employee, with an average of 2.4 employees (standard deviation 1.59). The education of the 29 employees is indicated by the finding that eleven people (38%) have a graduate degree, with eight out of those eleven degrees being in a subject outside the area of tourism; thirteen employees (45%) have a secondary level qualification, with eleven out of those thirteen having a qualification in a non-technical area. There is also one employee (3%) with a CET (Technology Specialization Course) in tourism and four (14%) with basic education.

Table 2. Tourist Information Offices human resource education

Education	<i>In the area</i>	<i>Outside the area</i>	Total	
<i>Master</i>	0	0	0	0%
<i>Graduate degree</i>	3	8	11	38%
<i>CET</i>	1	0	1	3%
	33%	67%		
	<i>Professional</i>	<i>Non-Professional</i>		
<i>Secondary</i>	2	11	13	45%
	15%	85%		
<i>Basic education</i>	4		4	14%
			29	

At the level of knowledge and mastery of foreign languages, we can see that 59% of employees have a good or average knowledge of English, 45% of French, 36% of Spanish and only one (5%) of German. Moreover, none of the employees has knowledge of Italian or another foreign language beyond those mentioned (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Knowledge and mastery of foreign languages



Another of the key issues in this analysis is data collection. It was found that in eleven (92%) of the tourist information offices, data about visitors is collected, and this is done in a systematic way in ten (91%) of the offices. However, the collection is centred essentially at the level of the visitors' origin in eight cases; at two of the offices, information about gender, and at one information about age, is collected, and in only three of these offices is there collection of more than one variable (in one of them gender and age, in another gender and origin, and in the third origin and one other). It was also noted that eight of the offices do not make public disclosure of the data collected.

A programme of activities and promotion of the tourist information office space was available in just four (36%) out of the eleven tourist information offices that responded, but only three (25%) out of the twelve offices are not selling handicrafts, food produce or other local items.

With regard to the promotional material and information available in the twelve tourist information offices we studied, we conclude that they distribute all or a very high percentage of their maps, flyers, brochures and travel guides in English and also in other foreign languages, as can be seen in Table 1. These promotional materials are mostly on paper, but digital versions are already beginning to have some relevance; digital roadmaps are already available in 50% of the tourist information offices analysed (**iError! No se encuentra el origen de la referencia.**).

Table 3. Promotional material

Promotional Material	Portuguese	Foreign language	Paper	Digital
<i>Flyers</i>	100%	75%	92%	33%
<i>Brochures</i>	100%	83%	92%	42%
<i>Publications</i>	75%	33%	75%	8%
<i>Travel guides</i>	92%	75%	83%	50%
<i>Maps</i>	100%			

In terms of ICT, its use is still rare, since only five (42%) of the offices indicated that they have a website. However, with the exception of one tourism information office, all are associated with a website, although these websites are not exclusive to the tourist information offices.

Regarding its presence in social networks, only Facebook⁴ and Twitter⁵ are mentioned by five (42%) and two (17%) tourist information offices respectively, and seven (58%) of the tourist information offices indicated that they did not use any social network. Given the importance of promoting information through information technology and the growing use of social media, and in the context of the increasing use of digital media and search engines for good quality information, this situation appears to be critical for promoting the destination and its resources.

With the set of data and information collected and set out here, we think that we have managed to form an overview of the tourist information offices of the OTSE territory, and have done an exploratory survey that will raise questions, propose action, and give clues to future research.

⁴www.facebook.com

⁵www.twitter.com

Conclusion

As part of the objectives of OTSE and the particular geographical area in which it acts, and given the increasing importance of tourism information in its various typologies, particularly within ICT, we sought to characterize the situation of the tourist information offices of Serra da Estrela. This study has allowed us to make a preliminary global analysis of the tourist information offices in the region and, in exploratory research, to evaluate the operating conditions and performance at a system level of tourism information and sustainable development. From the results, we can conclude that the efforts on the part of the public tourism entities and local government were to provide a tourist information service that was essentially static in nature and focused on the time horizon corresponding to the trip. The dynamic nature of information and the time horizon before the trip were forgotten. Given the results obtained, there is a way of achieving a better and higher quality provision of information and support for tourism at Serra da Estrela. In trying to help with this stride for development, and based on the data we collected and analysed, it is pertinent to put forward some considerations and suggestions. First, as part of the activity of these tourist information offices, we believe it is important to improve accessibility for people with physical disabilities, as well as emphasizing the need to increase the number of signs for some of the tourist information offices. There is a need to increase and extend opening hours, including at weekends and on holidays. In terms of human resources, which is a key element to the success of the mission and role of tourist information offices, the ability and level of education and training of the staff, both in general education and in specific areas (languages, statistics and computing), should be enhanced. A key role could be played by the partnership with the School of Tourism and Hospitality Management/Guarda Polytechnic Institute (ESTH/IPG), through the courses and degrees available or through specially designed courses for these professionals. Additionally, and in order to become more efficient and dynamic in terms of information for the tourist, there is a need to strengthen and improve the quality of the online presence and the use of ICT in the services provided by these tourist information offices.

With regard to possible collaboration between OTSE and the tourist information offices, a standard methodology for the collection and dissemination of statistical data, that is meaningful, reliable and useful, should be developed and implemented, enabling improved information to be made available for business management and policy makers, based on the trustworthiness and credibility of the Observatory. Moreover, a closer analysis of the type of promotional material available at the offices should be carried out, and improvements should be made which affect the image of the destination and the quality of the information.

Finally, it is essential to establish collaborative networks between various local parties involved in tourism (hotels, leisure companies, caterers, town halls, cultural institutions and others) and training and research institutions, to enhance the information flows that enable the destination to be promoted and to give a strategic direction for the sustainability of the destination.

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