

TOURISM AMBASSADORS AS A DESTINATION IMAGE INDUCERS

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Abstract. The image of destinations is a key factor when it comes to positioning and attracting the attention and interest of potential tourists. Today, the use of information and communication technologies (ICT) are part of virtually all areas of society, being also useful and fully adopted in tourism image projections (mainly through social networks). Therefore, this article focuses on the figure of the ambassador as a diffuser or enhancer of the image of a tourism destination, particularly through the use of a dedicated web platform created by the French tourism destination authority - the Savoie Mont-Blanc Ambassadeurs. To understand the repercussion of this initiative, a content analysis of its official Facebook page is made, studying variables such as fans, content and engagement.

Key words: destination brand image, tourism ambassadors, destination imagery, brand awareness, Savoie Mont Blanc Ambassadors.

1. Introduction

At the turn of the century, with the advent of territorial branding, branding concepts and techniques were transposed to the tourism phenomenon, under the guidance of marketing experts. However, there has been a gradual integration of these two concepts. Considering the marketing researchers' perspective, it is important the destination image notion to be included in the destination branding definition (Blain, Levy and Ritchie 2005). As for tourism researchers, they agree with the commonsense judgment expressed by Konecnik and Gartner (2007), according to which the image cannot be considered as the only explanatory factor of the decision-making process in tourism,

being necessary to isolate it from important dimensions such as notoriety, quality and loyalty.

In fact, Crompton's definition serves both parties, being brand image or destination image a simple a sum of beliefs, ideas and impressions/perceptions one person has about a destination/place (Crompton, 1979; Beerli & Martín, 2004; and Hallmann, Zehrer & Muller, 2015). Through branding, destinations build their reputation and differentiate themselves from competitors to reach customers and create loyalty among their target markets (Pike and Page 2014).

The literature has demonstrated the central role of partnerships (Hankinson 2012) and collaboration (Scott, Cooper and Baggio 2008) in destination branding, but empirical studies on the role of Tourism Ambassadors in destination and place branding are still rare. Hence, this study attempts to fill this research gap by aiming to increase understanding of destination brand image development dynamics from a tourism ambassador perspective. Particularly, it will focus on county Ambassadors promoting Savoie Mont Blanc as a destination for investment, tourism, learning and living, as their commitment and support are crucial for the destination brand to succeed (Hankinson, 2004; and Gartner and Ruzzier, 2011).

This research examines and evaluate the Savoie Mont Blanc Ambassadors' strategy based on their Facebook page, to determine how efficient may be this communication channel. As an exploratory study, it allows the approach to an unknown phenomenon to increase its degree of familiarity and contributes to determine the best approach to a given research. In addition, it may constitute an end in itself (Babbie 1979).

2. Literature review

2.1. Destination brand image and destination image, two concepts with the same meaning

According to Cai (2002), "destination brand image is a set of perceptions concerning a place that translates the existing associations in the tourist's memory" (p.723). Keller (1993) argues that the construction of the brand destination image consists, essentially, in identifying the most relevant associations of the destination, and in strengthening emotional bonds with the brand. In this framework, Ekinci (2003) proposes a conceptual model of destination branding that reflects these ideas. According to the author, destination image consists of three components: global image, destination brand, and from destination brand surges up the personality of a brand. Moreover, Qu, Kim, and Im (2011) vindicate that a destination's overall image (in other words, its brand image) mediates the relationship between its brand associations and tourists' future behavior. Further approach is provided by Konecnik and Gartner (2007), who build on Keller's

(1993; 2008; 2016) work to propose the concept of customer-based brand equity for tourism destinations (CBBE-TD), which consists of four interrelated components: (1) destination brand awareness – expresses how highlighted a destination brand name is in the tourist's mind (Aaker, 1996), (2) destination image – is the sum of associations a tourist has with a given destination, perceived quality- consists in customers' overall perception regarding the quality of products or services in comparison to the competition (Aaker, 1996), and (4) destination loyalty – reflects a tourist's attachment to the destination brand.

Still in the context of destination brand equity, García, Gomes and Molina (2012) proposed a conceptual model for the relationship between destination image and destination brand to analyze a destination brand's success. This model proposes five variables to analyze destination image: (1) infrastructure and socioeconomic environment; (2) natural and cultural resources; (3) pleasant atmosphere; (4) social setting environment and (5) overall image. And four variables to decompound destination brand: presented brand, brand awareness, brand meaning and brand equity (p. 650). More recently, Dias and Cardoso (2018) presented the destination brand choice (DBC) model, which added a fifth stage to the Aaker model (1996), called the post-visit re-evaluation, recognizing the fact that a tourist's quality experience may influence future travel decisions. This means, that a tourist also perceives destination image based on the tourism experiences that may occur at the destination (Boo, Busser & Baloglu 2009).

Returning to Keller's definition, brand image is the set of memory-based associations that consumers perceive about a brand (Keller 1993). In a destination image context (considering we are dealing essentially with tourists' perceptions), according to the CBBE-TD model, destination brand awareness (1st stage of brand equity) expresses how highlighted a destination brand name is in a tourist's mind (Aaker 1996). Therefore, and taking into account that destination image occupies the 2nd stage of destination brand equity (Konecnik and Gartner 2007), one can ask - how is destination image built in the tourist memory?

2.2. About destination the Ambassador role to contribute to the brand image.

According to Gartner (1993), awareness implies that a given destination image exists in the mind of potential tourists, and if a destination wants to be successful, it must achieve firstly awareness and then, a positive image. In other words, if the name of the destination is evoked by the tourist, it means that the tourist, somehow, knows that destination brand. This builds in Keller's (1993) argument that brand image is the set of memory-based associations that consumers perceive about a brand. The image perception process models can help us to understand the preceding factors that influence

the image formation process and answer the before-mentioned question. For tourism marketing experts (Gallarza, Saura and García, 2002; and Echtner and Ritchie, 2003; and Konecnik, 2005; and Hosany, Ekinci and Uysal, 2007) destination image represents an overall impression of the destination or, to be more precise, a set of impressions and feelings about it. Some authors (Baloglu and Mangaloglu, 2001; and Gallarza et al., 2002; and Gartner, 1994; and Gunn, 1972; and Konecnik, 2005) have identified two types of tourist destination images, the organic and the induced (Cardoso, Estevão, Fernandes and Alves 2017). The organic image is created from non-commercial sources, and is formed by the cultural component, that is, by general knowledge and by friends' information. The induced image differs from the organic one, since it is formed when the tourist seeks voluntarily or is submitted to any available commercial sources of information that stakeholders promote through the most diverse means (Cardoso et al. 2017; and Gallarza et al., 2002; and Önder and Marchiori, 2017).

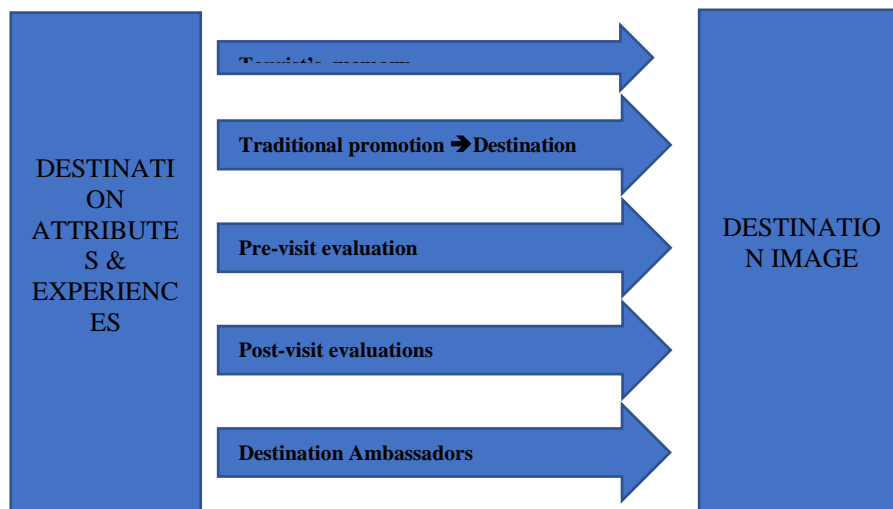
The most complete model of destination image formation is the Gartner model of 1993, which proposes the image formation process as a continuum from over-induced to autonomous and organic agents. It defines "image forming agent" as "a force that produces a specific result" (Gartner 1993 p.197) in destination image. Each agent has its own characteristics, so image formation differs according to the type of agent involved. Thus, as claimed by Gartner (1993), this process of image formation involves eight agents: (1) Overt induced I - traditional forms of advertising; (2) Overt induced II - Tour operator and tourism organizations advertising. (3) Covert induced I – When celebrities are used to promote a tourism destination. Well-known people are used to draw attention and to bring more credibility to the tourism destination. An example is the 2014 "Home from Home: Celebrities at TIFF Talk Toronto" campaign. In the promotional video we can identify several celebrities talking about the attributes of the destination; (4) Covert induced II – Appeal to writers, filmmakers, reporters, etc., who produce reports or films about a tourism destination, which apparently seem impartial, but, in fact, they are not; (5) Autonomous - Independent professionals, including news, documentaries, films, and TV show broadcasters, song writers, bloggers, filmmakers, etc. In fact, these agents are destination image ambassadors in such a way that this category presents two subcategories: news and popular culture. (6) Unsolicited organic - Recommendations/word of mouth from friends who have been in the destination or have feelings and opinions about it. In the current digital context, the visual appeal of images is what prevails, and the social networks are an excellent example of this image forming agent; (7) Solicited organic – Information that the tourist searched for about a destination; and (8) Organic - Last stage of the process of image formation that is built based on the visit to the destination.

In fact, only the autonomous agent has a significant impact on the tourist, because people are likely to consider information as relatively unbiased when compared to

traditional advertising (Kim and Richardson 2003). Baloglu and McCleary (1999) argue that the destination image created by stimulus factors depends on the quantity and type of information. So, in the process of destination image formation there are two different types of destination image, the induced image created by external stimuli and another image – the organic image – formed by the tourist experience at the destination (Baloglu and Mangaloglu, 2001; and Gartner, 1993; and Konecnik, 2005; and Prebensen, 2007). Moreover, the formation of destination image reveals its dynamic character as destination image is not static and is built over time, an important and useful aspect for the branding of tourist destinations, as each image is a manageable instrument (Beerli and Martín 2004). The way the destination image is evoked in tourist's memory is explained by the destination imagery process (DYP) model of Cardoso, Dias, Araujo and Marques (2019). The authors argue that when we analyze induced destination images we are facing destination imagery that they define as a “momentary processes of storage and retrieval of information from memory upon receiving destination stimuli and resulting in holistic perceptions of a destination” (Cardoso et al. 2019 p. 85). The result of this process of recalling the destination image in the tourist's memory, more precisely destination imagery, are the perceptions about the destination's attributes (Cardoso et al. 2019). And, in this context, Battour, Ismail and Battor (2011) argue that destination image' attributes have a strong impact on the destination choice. Besides, some studies show that the impact of ambassador's content analysis in the web is analyzed through the number of tweets, in case of Tweeter, or likes when talking about Facebook (Anderson, 2006; and Yoganathan et al., 2019; and Serna, Kepa and Alzua, 2014).

In 2009, Andersson and Ekman (2009) presented the concept of brand ambassadors as a recent phenomenon, even in the business world. However, currently, the concept is not so recent as it is often cloaked in other terminologies such as co-creation, often linked to web content of photographers (Kim and Stepchenkova 2015) and others. In fact, brand ambassadors are also co-creators of brand image, because they can publish information about a destination that will influence other users' perceptions (Jabreel, Moreno and Huertas 2017).

Figure1. Inducer factors of destination image formation



As shown in Figure 1, five factors are considered to be inducers of the destination image formation: i) Tourist's memory; ii) Traditional promotion within destination brand; iii) Pre-visit perceptions; Post-visit evaluations; and Destination Ambassadors. Personal characteristics influence the cognitive image of destinations and the experience gained from previous visits is also important, but, nowadays, information obtained from outside sources, mainly social networks, maybe more important. The destination image perceived in the mind of the tourist is mediated by a person's identity, cultural background and social, personal and psychological characteristics (Govers & Go 2005), what explains the significant power of influence from Tourism Ambassadors.

Diesbach (2012) refers that "the concept of brand ambassador and destination ambassador are often understood in a very limited approach with confusion, and not much effect because they only rely on strike power, famousness" (p.229). This, because the concept is often linked to celebrities who are invited to support destinations' promotional campaigns, and because of that, the information is somewhat manipulated. However, there are celebrities who are spontaneous ambassadors like Lionel Messi who was appointed Ambassador of Responsible Tourism by the World Tourism Organization in 2018¹, or Cristiano Ronaldo, considered the best ambassador of Funchal (Portugal), since it is his native island. In this paper, brand ambassador is conceptualized

¹ <http://media.unwto.org/press-release/2018-02-07/fernando-hierro-new-unwto-ambassador-responsible-tourism>

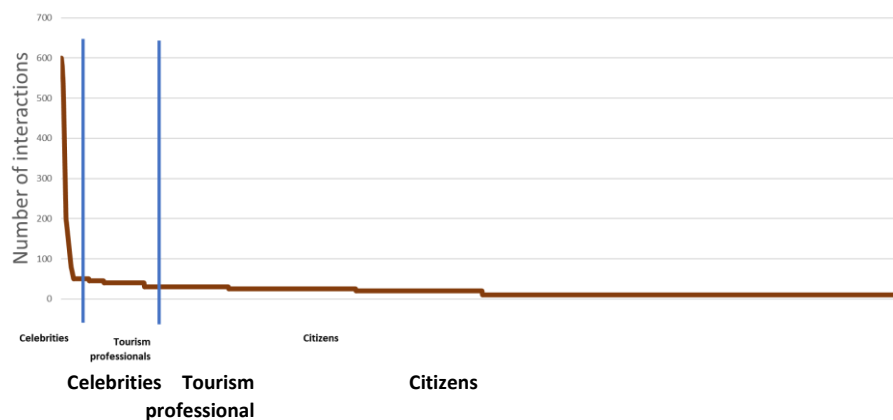
as a “credible testimony of the distinctive character of the place and its attractiveness and can through the word-of-mouth effect influence others through their networks and relationships” (Andersson & Ekman 2009 p. 43).

2.3. Theoretical approach of a DMO Ambassador model

Taking in consideration the long tail model elaborated by Anderson (2006), we recognize the first force of this approach is the democratization of the production of the destination content. To measure this work hypothesis, we propose to consider the number of interactions generated by three subgroups of ambassadors per week, assuming that 3 posts are published each week:

1. A small number of personalities followed by a substantial number of people.
2. The tourism professionals using the social networks
3. The citizens willing to act as Ambassadors and communicating on the social networks.

Figure 2. DMO Ambassador model – Theoretical number of Facebook interactions.



To draft this Long tail diagram, we accounted the following work hypothesis:

Table 1. Hypothesis of the number of interactions that can be generated by a network of DMO ambassadors

Sub-group	Estimated number of persons	Number of interaction's range	Estimated number of FB interactions per week.	Percentage of the interactions
Celebrities	10	350 to 600	4570	10.37%
Tourism Professionals	390	25 to 300	16010	36.32%
Citizens	1600	10 to 25	23500	53.31%
Total	2000		44080	

Having in mind to validate this hypothesis with the data publicly available for Savoie Mont-Blanc Tourism, we made some assumptions regarding the number of interactions generated by the Facebook posts only. We also limited the sample to 2000 individuals assuming that only 40 % of the ambassadors would posts on Facebook.

Providing that our assumptions are correct, the extension of the DMO ambassador model would generate nearly 90% of to the interactions with the Facebook population. These interactions being a supplement to the interactions generated by the celebrities.

2.4. Use case: “Savoie Mont-Blanc Ambassadeurs”



« Savoie Mont-Blanc Tourisme » is the DMO for the Savoie and Haute-Savoie areas. An area registering more than 66 million of tourist nights. This is a 4-season destination mainly oriented to winter sports and mountain but also including a substantial offer in terms of MICE and thermal spots. A network of local tourism offices exists to promote well-known destinations such as Tignes,

Val d’Isère, Chamonix or Annecy. All the communication channels are used to reach the potential tourists, including a panel of online tools from web sites, CRM and social networks.

Since many years, a large number of personalities like Cezanne the painter or Jean-Jacques ROUSSEAU or LAMARTINE used to promote the destination outside a formal marketing approach. Since the beginning of the 20th century, famous skiers such as Jean-Claude KILLY or mountaineers as Maurice HERZOG were also acting as ambassadors for the destination. Jean-Claude KILLY even licensed his name to the ski resorts under the name of “Espace Killy”. Currently, most of the national competitor skiers are sponsored by a local destination that requires to the athletes to wear the logo of their resort.

If the image of the celebrities was a good communication vector when communications channels were mainly conceived as a one-to-many, since 2004, the Web 2.0 revolution offers new opportunities for the communication that we can qualify as many-to-many. The number of authors rapidly surpassed the number of readers. “This bulimia of willingness to share contents quickly spread”¹. This started with the explosion of the number of blogs and now with more than 1.4 billion of Facebook users. Each of them having a substantial number of readers, even in absence of paid diffusion. This situation created a new opportunity for marketers that are now in position to canalize this enormous amount of communication. The new challenge is to convince the social network repositories’ authors or owners to talk about the brand or, in our case, the destination. This because inhabitants are the ones who know best their destination. They are often in direct contact with tourists and know better than anybody else what they like, dislike or expect.

In the case of Savoie Mont-Blanc, as mentioned above, with a job population of more than 49000 persons working in the tourism industry, the destination has a precious number of authors with an enormous list of tourists’ contacts who are ready to listen to their stories.

Therefore, they decided to create a network of Ambassadors in 2016 offering the possibility to any citizen to join this network with the intention to bring together a powerful and committed community serving the territory. Passionate about the territory, Savoyards of origin, adoption or heart, entrepreneurs, members of an association, artists, creators, students, sportsmen, visitors ... everyone can join the network of Ambassadors. Anyone in their field can enhance the territory with their knowledge and relationships, create new opportunities for collective and individual success through exchanges and meetings within the network of Ambassadors Savoie Mont Blanc.

This DMO is currently maintaining two Facebook pages: one targeted to the potential tourists and another targeted to the Ambassadors (see figure 4), However, in this study we only analyzed the Ambassadors Facebook page.

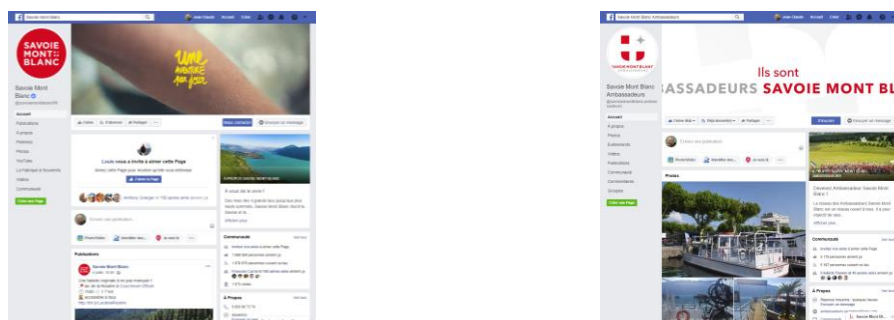


Figure 4. Savoie Mont-Blanc Tourism two Facebook pages

3. Sample and methodology

The present investigation uses the qualitative research method. Denzin and Lincoln (2002) argue that qualitative research has evolved and provides greater reflection that improves the research process reliability; therefore, this methodology is fully accepted (Hosking and McNamee 2007). To be more precise, content analysis is "a research technique for the objective and systematic description of the clear content of communication" (Berelson 1952 p.18)

Qualitative content analysis is one of several methods currently available for data analysis and interpretation of its meaning (Schreier 2012). It has been used for decades as a technique that analyzes communication messages in focus (McMillan 2000). Content analysis is a systematic, objective, and quantitative method for studying communication messages and developing inferences about the relationship between messages and their environment (Krippendorff 1980). It is a research method that follows a systematic and objective procedure to describe and quantify the phenomena (Schreier 2012)

The value of the qualitative description lies not only in the knowledge that can originate from it, but also because it is a vehicle to present and treat meanings and solid findings (Holloway, 2005; and Sandelowski, 2010). Even some authors consider content analysis as a type of narrative analysis (Sparkes 2005). In the present study, the analysis is focused on the main social network Savoie Mont Blanc Ambassadors' Facebook pages, which is a public social network. The period of analysis was from May-24 until June-22, two months. Two variables of analysis have been used: (1) content and (2) engagement. The variable "Content" (1) the analysis was operationalized through: Number of Page Posts with Post Types; Number of Fan Posts; Page Post Sources; Top 5 posts with more interaction. The second variable selected "Engagement" (2) was measured by: Most Engaging Post Types.

The software used for data analysis was "SocialBakers" available by subscription in <https://suite.socialbakers.com>.

4. Results

4.1. Facebook content results

Facebook's most attractive contents are photos and videos, and both were posted in a regular way, 9 times on 28 days, being the preference given to photos (5 times). This kind of audiovisual support represents high engagement probabilities in case of taking advantage of this web tool.

The activity ratio of the Top 5 posts shows the highest engagement in comments and shares, as can be seen in Figures 6,7,8, 9 and 10.

Les de Chambéry Savoie Mont Blanc Handball vainqueurs de la Coupe de France ce week-end à Paris ! Des compétiteurs et un staff au top niveau.



Interactions

197

Interactions per 1k

Fans
N/A

Interactions



Comments

7

Shares

13

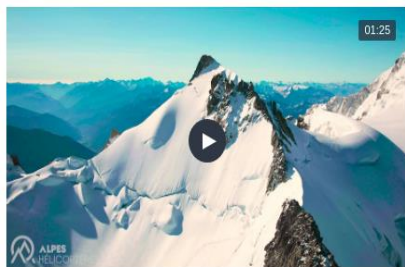
Total Interactions

197

Figure 6. Savoie Mont Blanc first Top 5-page post

From the results, it is clear that the first Top 5-page post, retrieved on June 18 the total number of 197 interactions. This post generated 197 interactions including 154 likes that represent 3.83 % of the targeted audience (the ambassadors). This ration can certainly be improved if the communication strategy is properly explained to the 5139 ambassadors.”

Découvrir le massif du Mont-Blanc en hélicoptère, juste magique !
Merci à notre Ambassadeur Jérémie Alpes Hélicoptères.



Video Length: 1 min 25 s

Interactions

148

Interactions per 1k

Fans
N/A

Interactions



Comments

8

Shares





49

Total Interactions

148

Figure 7. Savoie Mont Blanc second Top 5-page post

A more detailed analysis shows that Savoie Mont Blanc second Top 5-page post also performs well with 148 interactions also on June 18. This Facebook page stands out in the response item, as it presents 79 likes, 11 love and 1 wow. Comments are also 100% positive, and the engagement rate is 33% (49 shares).

Le  en Savoie Mont Blanc c'est :
 5 634 km itinéraires cyclo balisés
 300 km de véloroutes et voies vertes
 2 885 km itinéraires des sites VTT FFC
 Mais aussi de nombreuses manifestations cyclo 
<http://bit.ly/Evenements-Cyclo>



Interactions

146

Interactions per 1k
Fans

28,47



Interactions




Comments	7
Shares	21
Total Interactions	146

Figure 8. Savoie Mont Blanc third Top 5-page post

In line with previous results, the third Top 5 page posted on June 18 has 146 interactions, with 101 likes, 15 loves and 2 wows. A similar conclusion was reached when referring to comments, 100% positive in all seven reviews. The number of shares amounted to 21.

Très beau témoignage d'un passionné du territoire et Ambassadeur Savoie Mont Blanc : Jean Sulpice . Félicitation pour cette nouvelle distinction "chevalier de l'ordre national du mérite", reçue il y a quelques jours 

Vous aussi rejoignez la communauté 
 ► <http://ambassadeurs.savoie-mont-blanc.com/>



Video Length: 1 min 49 s

Interactions

146

Interactions per 1k
Fans

N/A

Interactions



Comments	1
Shares	40
Total Interactions	146

Figure 9. Savoie Mont Blanc fourth Top 5-page post

The Savoie Mont Blanc fourth Top 5-page post is consistent with what has been found in previous pages. The page registered 146 interactions on June 18th and received 86

likes, 16 loves and 3 wows. It reached 1005 positive comments and succeeded to get 40 shares.

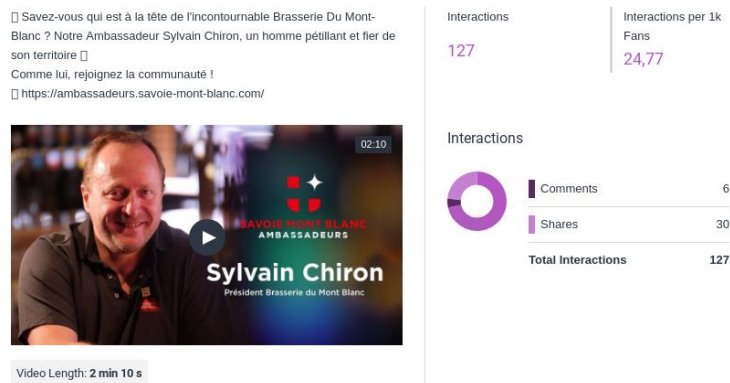


Figure 10. Savoie Mont Blanc fifth Top 5-page post

The last Savoie Mont Blanc Top 5-page post, ranked by the number of post interactions, got 146 views on June 23, with 86 likes and 5 loves. As all the others, the response was with 100% positive comments.

The day with the greatest activity for Figure 4 post was Sunday, 23 June, at 12:11h – 126 interactions with 91 reactions, 5 comments and 30 shares.

4.2. Engagement results

A similar pattern of results was obtained when analyzing the most engaging post types, namely video and photos. The analysis reveals an average of 124 interactions, per post displaying a video, against 110 average interaction, per post, with uploaded photos.

The posting on Facebook page as a regular basis, there are some prominent days, when an activity or events call more attention. A piece of content can spread and go viral online, meaning that content is shared exponentially on the internet. Those are rare occasions and content creation show some consistency, as is the case of Savoie Mont Blanc Tourism Ambassadors' Facebook pages. Table 2 shows some patterns variance according to the day of the week. On Sundays (197 interactions) the activity is higher, decreasing as the week progresses (146 interactions), being Fridays the lowest day of interaction in the week.

	Average interaction per post
Sunday May, 26	167
Wednesday May, 29	148
Friday June, 7	146

Friday June14	146
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Table 2. Savoie Mont-Blanc FB Ambassadors average number of interactions per post

These data should be compared with the score obtained by the official Savoie Mont-Blanc Tourism page <https://www.facebook.com/savoieumontblancFR/> during the same period:

Date of the post	Subject	Likes	Comments	Share	Σ of interactions
June 17	Montée des alpages	34000	2400	12000	48400
June 19	Ressentez le calme	6000	346	1200	7546
June 21	Lac de Darbon	9200	540	2000	11740
June 25	Brumisateurs naturels	11000	1000	6100	18100
	Total for the period	60200	4286	21300	85786

Table 3. Interactions with the Savoie Mont-Blanc FB official page.

5. Conclusions

With 5139 followers of the Facebook page “Savoie Mont Blanc Ambassadeurs” is a long way from reaching the official Facebook page of the Savoie Mont-Blanc tourism destination with 1 079 052 followers on July 5th, 2019. However, these pages have different roles. The one for the ambassador is one of the tools used to animate the network of ambassadors. But with less than 200 interactions per post and 2 posts per week (0.3 per day), the DMO does not reach its communication goal that we initially estimated to 44080 potential interactions per week in our hypothesis per week.

To improve engagement with users, several actions may be considered:

First, it should be clearly stated to the 3 subgroups of ambassadors, that are invited to share, like or/and comments the posts published. The communication strategy should be articulated more clearly as 3.83% of the ambassador community currently react.

Also, it would be necessary to increase the frequency of content generation, seeking to attract more attention and generate interest. Interaction is not excessively high, reaching the 5 most successful posts 52 average interactions, which means the reaction of 2.9% of the followers. However, the engagement can be described as good, close to 50% in terms of photographs and even higher, in the case of videos. This allows to conclude that the model is certainly correct applying the concept of the Long tail, extending the communication intermediaries using the citizens but the implementation needs to be revisited to approach the performance of the public Facebook page that enjoy.

6. Future lines of research

Future research should further develop and confirm these initial findings by extending the period of analysis to one year, as well as apply the study to the Facebook pages of the Ambassadors who are the most active.

Facebook being not the only social network used by the tourist, Pinterest, Instagram or LinkedIn may be analyzed. On the other hand, the communication is exclusively done in French while the destination is welcoming a large number of foreigners. Therefore, impacts on social networks in other languages may be a source of interesting findings. A cost efficiency approach may also be a subject of investigation comparing the cost of “hiring” a celebrity versus the cost of the animation of a network of ambassadors.

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