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TERRITORIAL MARKETING WITH VIRTUAL TOURS: AN EFFECTIVE STRATEGY FOR PROMOTING TERRITORY

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ABSTRACT

Essentially, the attractiveness of a territory seems to be linked to its ability to attract flows and make itself desirable. We then speak of attraction, or more precisely, appeal, which refers not only to demographic, environmental, and economic dimensions but also to criteria of notoriety, image, and reputation. In this sense, the tourism sector appears to be a vital lever for the competitiveness of a territory. Due to its ability to generate visibility and readability of spaces and vernacular products, this sector is often seen as a first experimentation of a city or country, leading to a possible retention of visitors. The literature review often describes Algeria as an extremely attractive territory, while other indicators point to a rather unappealing image of the country. We will then make the distinction between attractiveness, which first refers to the presence of potential, and competitiveness, which rather addresses the management of this capital. The challenge thus seems to be oriented towards the implementation of a logic that allows taking advantage of the assets present in situ to better respond to this problem of capturing and satisfying demand, both nationally and internationally. However, this issue must be addressed with up-to-date data. It must take into account the evolution of tourists' behavior, who increasingly refer to digital media to outline an image of their future destinations. Thus, the digital age and the growing importance of information and communication technologies seem to be revolutionizing territorial marketing and, in particular, the tourism sector. Naturally, the reflection turns to Algeria's ability to accompany this movement. In other words, what are the methods and tools used in terms of territorial marketing and, more precisely, in the field of tourism and e-tourism?

Our research undertakes a retrospective of experiences with virtual tours of heritage monuments produced by our team (using a 3D scanner). From the Bey's palace to the tomb of Massinissa, passing through the Roman aqueduct of Constantine, we attempt to highlight the impact of these innovative tourism products in enhancing the tourist elements of a city or territory. An introspection of the feedback on these services will allow us to better understand the expectations of visitors on one side, and to revise territorial marketing approaches on the other. The objective is to move away from classical policies by proposing more competitive, innovative strategies.

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I. Introduction.

1. General Context.

The attractiveness of a territory, linked to its ability to arouse interest, is crucial for its competitiveness. This notion encompasses demographic, environmental, and economic dimensions, as well as criteria of reputation and image. The tourism sector remains a vital lever for this competitiveness through its ability to generate visibility for local resources and spaces. For Algeria, the potential attractiveness of the territory does not seem to be in line with empirical reality. The literature review highlights a territory that meets "all the criteria for tourist attractiveness" yet occupies "the last ranks in terms of competitiveness" (Baouali et al., 2020, 258). An issue that would require adaptation to current trends, particularly digital tools. The evolution of tourists' behavior, who increasingly use digital media to plan their trips, and the impact of e-reputation and virtual image on the perception of elements and environments (Benraïss-Noailles et al., 2016) seem to be revolutionizing territorial marketing and raise the question of Algeria's ability to align with this methodological shift. At the end of this logic, our team has produced a series of virtual tours of historical monuments to try to join this new dogma related to e-tourism. How do these productions influence the attractiveness of heritage and territory? Can these undertaken marketing strategies boost the competitiveness of the tourism sector in a still-disconnected context where the timid integration of ICTs (Adnane and Benlahcen, 2022) is still perceptible?

2. Theoretical Context.

The territory presents itself as a dynamic system where constant interactions are woven between the spatial components and the society that resides there. It also presents itself as a space acted upon by the governance of the actors who conceive it (Moine, 2005). Thus, its strength, its identity, and its symbolic character reflect not only its potential but also the institutional and societal strategies that manage and shape it (Hospers 2004). They reveal its characteristics, its specificities, its design, and its piloting, which presuppose its attractiveness. We will then speak of an ability to attract resources from outside and maintain them. In other words, the effectiveness and efficiency that translate into the competitiveness and performance of a territory (Lozato-Giotart, Leroux, and Balfet 2012, 230).

From a tourism perspective, the attractiveness of the territory presupposes its ability to attract a flow of visitors, to retain and retain them (Massou 2015). It is part of a reflection on the valorization of territorial resources (Baouali et al. 2020). It refers to the attributes, or rather the exploitation of the attributes that favor the competitiveness of a place. In Algeria, it seems that tourism is struggling to revive and revitalize the territory. It also struggles to concretely integrate into the country's development policy. While the country ranks fourth among the most visited countries in Africa (Smith S. L.J 2014), the majority of revenues (71%) concern expatriates returning to the country and their families in situ (Baouali et al. 2020). Thus, there are only 500,000 people who really conform to the authentic definition of a tourist (Baouali et al. 2020). A result that is reflected in financial returns. This only constitutes 3.9% of the gross product (considered the lowest in terms of the share of the tourism sector in the Maghreb) (Khemici, 2017, 143).

Everything suggests that Algerian territorial assets remain unexploited and unvalued, which seems to weaken the country's tourism promotion. Thus, the brand image appears blurred, or even neglected, to allow real territorial attractiveness and competitiveness. Even though we detect a political will to improve the reality (Tabouche, Benzair 2015), current events still report shortcomings in this sector (Abada and Four 2019). Should this still be attributed to classical thinking? Or is it due to a

spontaneous impermeability to new approaches? Many questions arise concerning this situation, where a country seems to consciously disregard all the codes of current territorial promotion.

II. Materials and Methods.

In this research work, the reflection focuses on the effectiveness of new approaches to territorial promotion. In other words, the impact of virtual tours is to remedy the shortcomings of current policies. In this sense, we base ourselves on an explanatory paradigm that deals with the essence and existence of socio-cultural phenomena. In a detour on Malinowskian theories (Radcliffe-Brown 1949), we consider attractiveness as a result of an interest in a destination, a product, or a territory. It is established as a result of a process based on chosen, targeted functionalism and performance. Future choices and policies are then examined through this logic that considers cultural and historical potential as an element of appeal to establish territorial marketing. At the end of this logic, virtual tours are presented as a component related to the parameterization of the system related to tourism and e-tourism. This system of representation, essential to this sector, is based on socio-cultural norms that are supposed to give a reassuring and seductive image of a destination. In this context, the virtual world becomes either an introduction to reality or an unprecedented immersion in this reality. Thus, the work carried out by our team within the National Center for Territorial Planning becomes a new experience of the cultural material of the Algerian territory. These products, notably the virtual tour of the Palace of the Bey of Constantine and the Tomb of Massinissa, were developed to create academic content in order to make these sites known, enhance their value on the one hand, and boost their attractiveness on the other. Our approach is based on hypothetico-deductive logic. We presume the efficiency of these digital tools in the revelation, preservation, and valorization of historical monuments. We will divide our methodology into two parts: the first concerns the way of developing the tour in order to arouse the attractiveness of the heritage. The second part delves, through a qualitative survey, into the feedback from these experiences on territorial marketing.

1. Design of the Virtual Tour.

During this phase, interest was focused on identifying an appropriate approach that would allow the presentation of scientifically-based content while proposing an interactive, general public popularization. The objective was not to substitute physical visits but rather to offer a teaser to seduce "the population that still hesitates on the threshold" (Terrisse 2013). On another level, these new technologies had to allow the exposure of more information about the scanned sites in a more studied way. Moreover, if "the internet has now become a territory in itself," it is necessary for it to make the user eager for reality (Terrisse 2013). It is from this perspective that the conceptual choices for the virtual tours were established.

We will use a LEICA BLK 360 scanner for capturing reality and generating files (a point cloud as well as panoramic photos via the Cyclone software), which will be exploited later in the creation of the virtual tour. A technique that allows for more precision while controlling the scan positions on the field (for better rendering of the monument or site) (Dekeyser et al. 2003). In a second step, the generated files will be processed by the 3D Vista software, which allows the integration of more effects aimed at making the tour more attractive. This technical work will be superimposed on a bibliographic background, with the objective of giving scientific legitimacy to the product. Ultimately, it will be put online as open access for more abundant dissemination. This procedure will be applied in our study to the Tomb of Soumaa as well as the Palace of the Bey in Constantine.

2. Empirical Survey.

In a second step, the empirical aspect will be investigated to detect the feedback and impacts of these products on the attractiveness of the monuments. In this sense, we will use complementary survey methods (Aldebert and Rouziès 2011). In other words, mixed investigation techniques (Creswell 2013), which combine under the name of explanatory design, are a sequential process where "the qualitative data [from comments and reactions of the public and staff of the scanned establishments] generally come to deepen and explain in more detail the initial quantitative results [from the analysis of the number of visits recorded]" (Aldebert and Rouziès 2011, 6). In this logic, the first phase, which deals with the collection of the number of visitors, will be based exclusively on the statistics provided by the visits to the site hosting the tour, while the second stage will be based on the comments recorded on social

networks, which will be supplemented by the remarks of the staff of the historical monuments scanned. To this end, we will conduct focused interviews (Dépelteau 2010), aiming to probe the opinions of the employees who seem most likely to react to the situation of attendance at the monuments before or after the launch of the virtual tours. This exercise is structured according to themes rather than closed questions, which allows more freedom for the respondents. The underlying objective was to re-examine the inherent functions of this type of exercise while mitigating the traditional disjunction imposed by the academic conventions of interviews. To determine the status of the informant, we supplement that of the expert (Brunfaut, Terlinden, and Vella, 2015). Thus, the respondents will be able to express their point of view in an exhaustive manner by identifying and reporting all the changes they observe during the post-virtual tour period. An approach aimed at analyzing the impact of the latter (now considered as marketing tools) on territorial attractiveness.

III. Results.

Figure 1 shows how many visitors were attracted to the two monuments—the Bey's palace and Soumaa's (Massinissa) tomb—thanks to the virtual tours. However, the statistical analysis shows that Bey's palace clearly predominates. Numerous factors contribute to this prevalence: on the one hand, the choice of the launch period (midsummer, during vacations); on the other hand, the lightness of the advertising strategy associated with the latter; and finally, the late deployment of the second tour online.

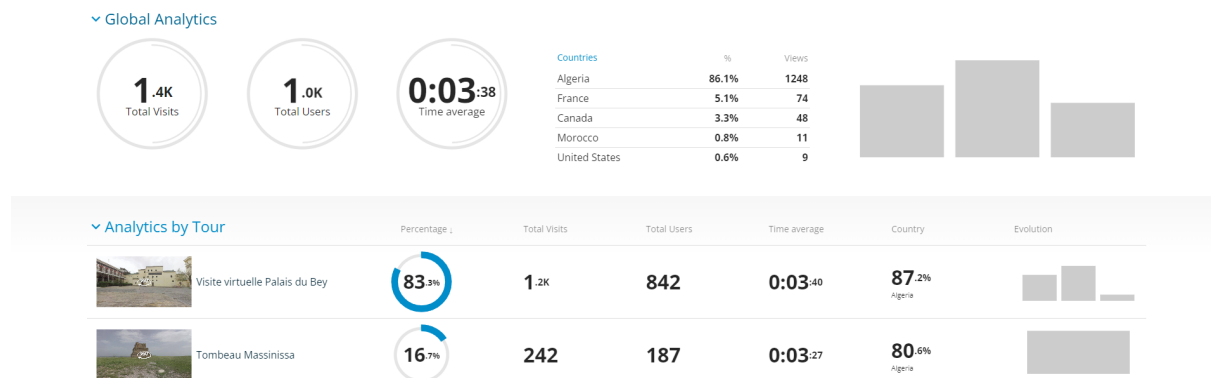


Figure 1. Number of visitors to the virtual visits. Source: author, 2023.

The virtual tours have captured the attention of a substantial number of users worldwide, generating a manifest interest from about thirty countries. With regard to the geographic origin of visitors, it should be noted that an overwhelming predominance comes from Algeria. The other nations, whether they host diasporas or neighboring African countries, share the top positions in this context (Table 1).

Table 1. Showing number of visits and percentage of visitors by country.

Country	Number of visits	Percentage of visitors
1	2	3
Algeria	1248	86.1%
France	74	5.1%
Canada	48	3.3%
Morocco	11	0.8%
United States	9	0.6%

Table 1. Continuation.

1	2	3
Burkina Faso	9	0.6%
United Kingdom	9	0.6%
Benign	7	0.5%
Czech Republic	4	0.3%
Belgium	4	0.3%
Tunisia	3	0.2%
Egypt	3	0.2%
Poland	2	0.1%
Qatar	2	0.1%
Netherlands	2	0.1%
Ireland	2	0.1%
Italy	2	0.1%
Niger	1	0.1%
Cameroon	1	0.1%
Germany	1	0.1%
Guinea	1	0.1%
Hungry	1	0.1%
Democratic Republic of Congo	1	0.1%
Portugal	1	0.1%
Spain	1	0.1%
Sweden	1	0.1%
United Arab Emirates	1	0.1%

Regarding the behavior of users during the virtual tours, a keen interest is shown in the architectural landscape, architectural elements, as well as the textual and photographic information provided. This tour therefore seems to differ from a traditional tour by presenting the monument in a more comprehensive way while continuously enriching the data available to users in a concise yet in-depth manner (Figure 2).

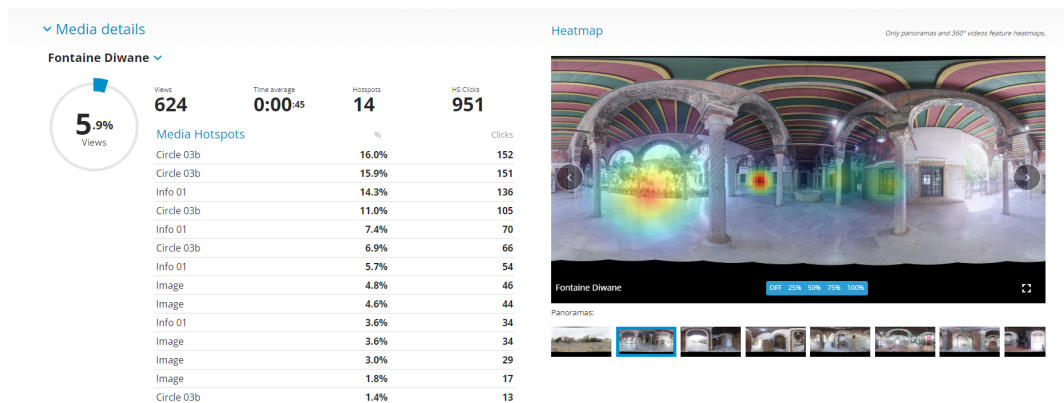


Figure 2. User behavior during the virtual visit. Source: author, 2023.

In terms of observed reactions, internet users' comments highlight the imperative to "take charge in an imperative way (...) of the archaeological and cultural heritage" through this type of product. At the same time, others highlight the transition towards "digitalization" and digitization processes in dealing with issues of preservation and enhancement of cultural and heritage territorial assets. According to internet users, this approach makes it possible to present and, above all, "immortalize these jewels of Constantine," symbols of "resilience and assurance of sustainability" (source: CRAT Facebook page). From another point of view, some users believe that this initiative will contribute to "raising awareness among heritage and tourism stakeholders, as well as civil society" in general, about the importance of these assets in improving territorial marketing. These comments reveal an obvious need for this type of work, demonstrating the unanimous appreciation of consumers for this new approach to Algerian territory and its assets (source: CRAT Facebook page). In the context of the survey on the reactions from professionals and staff working within the institutions responsible for the conservation of monuments, the interviews reveal a significant improvement in the attendance at sites, particularly with regard to the Bey's palace. This increase in attendance seems to coincide with the deployment of virtual tours, suggesting that these productions played a catalytic role in the rise of attendance at these monuments. This observation is reinforced by a notable change in the attitude of visitors, who seem to exhibit greater familiarity and increased interest in these places during their visits.

IV. Discussion.

Everything suggests that the attractiveness of the territory in Algeria is far from being acquired, and these processes are still slowly being renewed despite the diversity of cultural and natural assets (Abada and Foura 2019). It also does not seem to have been fully envisioned as a vector for integrating into the sphere of globalization or as a lever for the development and revitalization of territories. As a result, the country projects a rather unattractive and unappealing tourist image, even though "tourist iconography is concomitant with a change in the way the territory is presented" (Bernadou 2017). Based on the previous paragraphs, a country's branding strategy must take into account the perceived elements that make up its public image (Bouacha 2016). And if the brand evokes associations and emotions in the minds of tourists, it also allows for the generation of links between a territory, a destination, and a target audience. During our experience, most of the feedback from visitors, especially foreigners, was surprised to find this type of architecture and monuments in Algeria. A finding that would initially point to the low resonance of Algeria's tourist image. However, a deeper analysis would rather suggest the absence of an adapted territorial marketing strategy. "Historically, the concept of 'city brand' has long been applied when the city's name is associated with a particular product, a category of products, an event, or other characteristics of the city. The city's name can become a guarantee of quality and differentiation, which is one of the primary functions of a brand." (Bouacha 2016, 30). However, Algeria does not seem to maintain its strengths and points of differentiation sufficiently. It also does not seem to venture into a contextualized territorial promotion policy that covers more or less the negative points while insisting on positive vernacular aspects. It would be a matter of basing itself on the existing to create desires, motives for visits, and consumption (Boukhobza, 2020). Moreover, in the tourism field, the choice of a destination is the result of a selection process from competing alternatives (Crompton

1992), which cognitive factors strongly influence (Echtner and Ritchie 1991). In this logic of perception of a potential destination (Gartner 1994), the more the strengths and positive aspects are highlighted, the more likely it is to be chosen (Croy 2010).

On another level, "today's tourist is a hyper-connected and over-informed e-tourist" (Madouche and Zair 2018, 468). Thus, the importance of virtual dissemination channels becomes paramount to communicating about destinations and their assets. Especially since the consumer decision-making process aims to limit disappointment by being as well-informed as possible about their future choice (Madouche and Zair 2018, 468), It is in this reflection that these virtual tours are integrated, which seem to give impetus to an under-represented tourism sector that is therefore little chosen by consumers. However, despite positive feedback, especially from Internet users, the weakness of medical infrastructure and the lack of interest in ICTs considerably limit the impact and visibility of these productions. At a time when structures such as the Louvre display tens of millions of visitors per quarter (Utopix, 2022), the CRAT barely exceeded the one million mark. During this dissemination phase, we solicited several structures in the field that did not show much interest in this product. A habit of a classic marketing methodology where an apprehension of digital productions makes the potential responses seem multiple. However, they would converge on the whole towards an impermeability to change. At a time when "the advent of the internet and information and communication technologies has brought about profound changes in the tourism sector" (Faouzi 2018), some countries like Algeria remain captive to the traditional effects that are poorly adapted to current demand (Mouna 2014). In the wake of this hypothesis, "a tourism product or a territory is better announced through digital tools or digital marketing than through other traditional tools and means" (Benmehdi 2021, 268). The implementation of digital marketing in the tourism sector in Algeria is characterized by a relatively limited performance, still failing to fully capitalize on the inherent potential of digital technologies. The country remains lagging in this regard (Benmehdi, 2021). In this sense, the SDAT 2030 and PQTA (Abada and Foura 2019) should further develop the concept of valuation to include the digital tool at the center of this strategy.

Conclusion.

In the context of emerging countries such as Algeria, the application of digital marketing in the tourism sector is crucial for the country's economic development. It is clear that tourism is now considered a national imperative. This strategic orientation aims to fully exploit the country's potential and assets to stimulate economic growth, enhance the national cultural and historical heritage, and increase competitiveness on the international scene. However, despite these ambitions and the richness of Algeria's heritage, the tourism sector in Algeria has faced persistent difficulties. The country has not yet managed to position itself among the most competitive tourist destinations in the world, as evidenced by its relatively low ranking in the Euro-Mediterranean Network of Investment Promotion Organizations in the tourism industry.

The policies implemented so far to promote tourism development have shown their limitations, and Algeria has been faced with a lack of communication, low visibility abroad, and challenges related to information and communication technologies (ICTs). ICTs, which inevitably become a major asset in the modern tourism industry, facilitating in particular the presentation, promotion, and enhancement of territorial riches and strengths. An area little invested in Algeria due to a lack of advanced ICT infrastructure, technological skills and even interest in this new digital vision. To overcome these obstacles and fully exploit its tourism potential, Algeria must invest in digital marketing. In this sense, virtual tours offer an example, an opportunity to promote the country's cultural, architectural and natural heritage to a wider, national and international audience. They also make it possible to better control the country's brand image by insisting on positive attributes. The experiences produced by the CRAT (as well as the feedback on experience) demonstrate that there is a real need to fill the virtual void of a sector still stuck in classical approaches.

Ultimately, the attractiveness of the Algerian territory involves better capitalizing on its assets, strengthening its communication, and above all modernizing its ICT infrastructure and digital marketing strategies to create a competitive image. Thus, the enhancement of heritage and the creation of a unique tourist experience seem to be key elements to strengthen Algeria's appeal and better position it on the world tourism scene.

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