

Virtual Mexico: Magical Towns in 360 degrees

An exploratory study of the potential of 360-degree video in promoting cultural tourism

by

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Abstract

This thesis critically evaluates the potential of 360-degree video played in VR to promote Mexico's cultural tourism in the UK. It looks at the Magical Towns programme, a strategy of the Mexican government to diversify the tourism industry through cultural tourism. The programme groups a series of towns with specific characteristics under an umbrella brand. This study focuses on two towns with the Magical Town designation: Tequila and Tlaquepaque. Both towns play emphatically with Mexico's country identity, replicating imagery, icons, art, music, and atmospheres considered 'authentically Mexican'. With a case study approach, this thesis examines the current promotional and communication strategies among stakeholders in both towns and their willingness to adopt new promotional tools. It also looks at the opinions of potential visitors, assessing awareness levels, perceptions and preconceptions about Mexico, attitudes towards using 360-degree video, and the format's effectiveness in changing them. This thesis proposes that a solid marketing communications and PR strategy could incorporate 360-degree video technology to raise awareness and promote Mexico's cultural tourism. The findings suggest that 360-degree video is a novel promotional tool that can significantly contribute to constructing Mexico's country image and reputation by depicting places strongly related to its country identity and branding. However, the preference for more straightforward promotional material, such as photographs, will prevail. The implementation of 360-degree video should therefore be part of an integral promotional campaign and not a stand-alone promotional tool.

Dedication

To my family, who were always supportive in the distance.

To my life partner Jonathan.

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Chapter 1. Introduction

1.1 Research context

This thesis examines the potential of using 360-degree video to promote Mexico's cultural tourism. It looks at the *Pueblos Mágicos* programme (hereinafter referred to as the Magical Towns programme), a strategy of the Mexican government to diversify the tourism industry through cultural tourism. Using a case study approach, this thesis focuses on two towns with the Magical Town designation: Tequila and Tlaquepaque. Both towns play emphatically with Mexican identity, replicating imagery, icons, crafts, music, atmosphere, and cultural aspects considered 'Mexican'. This thesis investigates whether a solid marketing communications and PR strategy could integrate 360-degree video technology to raise awareness and promote Mexico's cultural tourism.

Tourism is a crucial platform for Mexico's development. The tourism industry contributed 8.7% of Mexico's annual GDP in 2018 and 2019 (INEGI, 2019; INEGI, 2020; SECTUR, 2020e), consolidating itself as one of its economy's main engines (SECTUR, 2018a, p. 79). In 2020, however, it only contributed 6.7% due to the closure of venues for non-essential activities in hospitality during the Covid-19 pandemic (INEGI, 2021), which is still a significant contribution. One of the principal stakeholders in the Mexican tourism industry is the government. The Mexican government has shaped tourism through the years with entities like the Secretariat of Tourism (known as SECTUR). Tourism in Mexico generates employment and business opportunities pushing for the integral development of communities and destinations. Today, Mexico is the most visited country in Latin America and the 7th most visited country in the world (UNWTO, 2021).

Mexico's privileged geographical position is a critical factor contributing to its success as a destination. Located in North America, Mexico has coastlines on the Atlantic Ocean with the Gulf of Mexico and the Caribbean Sea and a long coastline on the Pacific Ocean, including the Gulf of California. Mexico is the country with the largest number of Spanish speakers (Instituto Cervantes, 2021, p. 9), and it shares one of the busiest land borders with its biggest commercial partner, the US. Along with Canada, the three form a strong economic bloc under a multilateral free trade agreement known as USMCA. This position gives the country advantages in natural resources, commerce, and tourism, serving as a bridge connecting Hispanic-America with Anglo-America.

Although the US and Canada have long been Mexico's primary targeted tourist market, the UK has become the third-largest (SECTUR, 2018a, p. 40). In 2015, Mexico and the UK

celebrated a dual year, declaring it the Year of Mexico in the UK, and the Year of the UK in Mexico, strengthening their relationship by promoting a cultural interchange, educational opportunities, and tourism (GOV.UK, 2013). Likewise, in 2020 they signed an agreement of mutual recognition and protection of designations for spirit drinks, including tequila, the iconic Mexican beverage that embodies *mexicanidad*, and in 2022, they started negotiations for a post-Brexit free trade agreement (GOV.UK, 2022b). However, with the challenging conditions that Covid-19 brought to the travel industry in 2020, Colombia became the third country that most visited Mexico, making the UK fall in the list after Brazil, France, and Argentina (SECTUR, 2020b). This unusual situation resulted from the travel restrictions and stay-home advice the UK faced during the pandemic. Nonetheless, the UK has good direct air connectivity to Cancún, Puerto Vallarta, Los Cabos, and to other major cities via connecting flights stopping in Mexico City or other North American hubs. Soon, this could return the UK to its third place.

Most of Mexico's international tourism industry focuses on developing holiday destinations. Famous beach resorts include Cancún, Puerto Vallarta, Los Cabos, and Acapulco. The south-east, containing the Mundo Maya area, where the Maya Riviera offers the Mexican Caribbean destinations of Isla Mujeres, Cancún, Playa del Carmen, Cozumel, and Tulum, hosts almost half of the country's international arrivals (47.5%) and nearly two-thirds of international stays (62%) (OECD, 2017, p. 18). However, the country highly depends on domestic tourism as local tourists are more evenly spread throughout the country and contribute to the local economy of places international tourists do not go. Therefore, the industry and authorities insist on strategically diversifying the international tourism market, particularly by providing cultural tourism alternatives.

One of the most consolidated projects in cultural tourism is the Magical Towns programme. It is a bottom-up initiative that groups a series of towns and villages under an umbrella brand that serves as a distinguishing designation. The programme incorporates elements of rural and cultural tourism in towns and villages that have preserved their Spanish and Indigenous American heritage, as opposed to most modern-day Mexican towns, attempting to provide domestic and international visitors with an authentic and more traditional experience in a charming atmosphere than that of the highly developed beach resorts.

The Magical Towns programme was created in 2001 by the Secretariat of Tourism. It is a strategy of the Mexican government for the diversification of tourism and the development of small localities. On the one hand, it structures a complementary and diversified tourism alternative towards the country's interior by grouping towns with a high tourism potential based on their historical and cultural features (SECTUR, 2014). On the other hand, it boosts the economic growth of such localities through public policies delivered by the three levels of government

(federal, state, and municipal), allowing interaction and networking between stakeholders and society (Madrid, 2014, p. 271). Both aims are equally important and follow the governmental tourism agenda for driving Mexico to become a world-class destination by promoting its tangible and intangible heritage richness as national priorities (SECTUR, 2014).

One of the main benefits of becoming a Magical Town is obtaining the designation and right to use a nationally recognised brand for its tourism promotion. The Magical Towns designation is a form of validating a place's culture, heritage, and tourism potential, making a place more attractive for visitors. Likewise, becoming a Magical Town increases the interest of investors from the private sector, and it initially granted access to public funds for infrastructure, though that is not the case anymore. Additionally, being part of the programme increases the community's self-esteem as it recognises their traditions and heritage, giving a reason to be proud (Madrid Flores, 2014, pp. 209-210) and the right to use the brand for labelling local products and crafts.

Although most visitors are domestic tourists, the current Mexican authorities aim to internationalise the Magical Towns programme. President López Obrador's austerity plan for the term 2018-2024 dissolved Mexico's Tourist Board (known as Council for Tourism Promotion), leaving the organisation of local promotion in the Secretariat of Tourism's hands (López, 2019, p. 11) and created the Tourism Diplomacy Council within the Secretariat of Foreign Affairs to take over the international promotion of Mexican destinations (López, 2019, p. 79). The increasing number of British tourists and the new structures for international promotion represents an opportunity for the Mexican government to promote and internationalise the Magical Towns programme with the possibility of making the UK their door into the European market, where the programme is highly unknown. It is also for this reason that this study uses the anglicised form of the programme's name. Therefore, this thesis proposes using marketing communications and PR to promote the Magical Towns programme in the UK.

The use of marketing communications and PR strategies to promote countries and tourist destinations intends to improve their image and attract more visitors. According to Barich and Kotler (1991, p. 95), *image* is 'the sum of beliefs, attitudes, and impressions that a person or group of persons has of an object', and it is intrinsically related to reputation, defined as 'the result of what you do, what you say and what others say about you' (CIPR, n.d.). Countries need to have a good image among foreign audiences because it impacts several areas. It improves international relations, foreign investments, political stability, and the attractiveness of their culture, which is essential for cultural tourism.

The attitudes and actions that people have towards organisations and social entities are based on the image they have (Buhmann, 2016). Their image is fundamentally constructed by their

perception, defined as how individuals see the world based on their own life experiences, stimuli, and interpretations. People are exposed to many stimuli every day, some of which are in the form of promotional material. From television ads to billboards on the street, buses, magazines, websites, email, and social media, the sensory organs naturally select the more important and attractive ones and give them special meanings. That natural interpretation impacts everyday attitudes, motivations, and values (Fill, 2002, p. 63) and creates an image and attitude towards many things. Therefore, controlling the stimuli people are exposed to could significantly impact people's image and attitudes towards a country or a tourist destination.

Many of those stimuli come through the use of new technologies. With pictures on the Internet, videos shared on social media, user-generated content, and endless possibilities for display devices, people see the world through the images they are presented with. New technologies present new opportunities to change attitudes and images as a promotional tool for marketers and PR practitioners or as a consumer-empowering tool. The increasing adoption of new technologies in the tourism industry brings the opportunity to find and provide new and more innovative ways to promote destinations.

Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) have dramatically transformed the tourism industry. They have had repercussions in areas of business, strategies, and structure (Buhalis and Law, 2008; Racherla *et al.*, 2008), influencing every aspect, stakeholder, and the tourists themselves (Xiang, 2018; Benckendorff *et al.*, 2019; Gretzel *et al.*, 2020). In a world where the relationship between technology and tourism is stronger than ever, tourists' behaviour and ways of engaging with the industry are changing. Amid the Covid-19 pandemic, technology is developing new solutions. The hospitality sector started to accept only contactless payments encouraging using smartphones and wearable devices to pay, airlines started implementing more self-check-in machines, and restaurants moved to have digital menus by scanning QR codes on mobile apps. Above all, technology has changed how tourists seek and share information.

In the Information Age, tourists have access to larger sources of information, which has empowered and made them more knowledgeable about destinations (Buhalis and Law, 2008). As media shifted from the traditional one-way mass communication to more individual, segmented and interactive communication, their behaviour changed towards the new possibilities that media offers, becoming more participant (Livingstone, 1999; Cho *et al.*, 2002). Today, tourists can express their opinions about destinations, hotels, airlines, restaurants, and tours, on YouTube videos, reviews, and platforms like TripAdvisor, where other users can see, read, and leave their comments (Leung *et al.*, 2013; King *et al.*, 2014). The influence of such user-generated content in the decision-making process of potential tourists has been so relevant that it has

become an essential part of the success of every destination (Lim *et al.*, 2012; Camprubí *et al.*, 2013; Narangajavana *et al.*, 2017; Koufodontis and Gaki, 2019). Consequently, tourism marketers and PR practitioners increasingly use new technologies to promote tourist destinations (Cho *et al.*, 2002). They have done it by improving the interaction and communication between the industry and the consumers (Buhalis and Law, 2008) through visual social platforms such as Instagram and YouTube and specific technological innovations such as Big Data, Web 2.0/3.0, and VR.

What is known as VR today is the result of combining different technologies and concepts that followed different evolutionary paths (Neelakantam and Pant, 2017). From early Victorian stereoscopes to the idealisation of VR in science fiction and popular culture to the development of smartphones' technical capabilities, 'people have long been captivated by the promise of a portable world' (Sokohl, 2017, p. 6). As a technological concept, VR attempts to provide that portable world through an immersive simulation in which the user can feel transported to a different place or environment. Such a virtual environment could be a replica of a real place or an artificial computer-generated one. A common and affordable way of providing a virtual environment for VR is through incorporating 360-degree video.

The 360-degree video format has its roots in the concept of panoramic views in art, evolving into digital formats. More than 200 years ago, painter Robert Barker displayed a mural painting of the city of Edinburgh in a circular room in London. People had a 360-degree experience for the first time and felt like being in a different place (Dorta, 2004, p. 4). The concept jumped to the digital world in the 1990s, allowing users to move around still photographs in 360 degrees using the computer's mouse (Othman *et al.*, 2002, p. 364), and it is still in use today on platforms like Google Street View. The core idea consists of several cameras pointing in different directions simultaneously and stitching the resulting images into a single file. The idea was soon transported to video, displaying it on different devices such as computers, smartphones, tablets, or head-mounted displays (hereinafter referred to as HMDs) (Neumann *et al.*, 2000; Hernández *et al.*, 2001; Fraustino *et al.*, 2018). Today, the integration and support of this format on several online platforms, such as Facebook and YouTube, encourage uploading and sharing user-generated 360-degree videos.

There has been debate on whether 360-degree video should be considered a form of VR. For Othman *et al.* (2002), the difference lies in the fact that VR immerses the user in an artificial environment providing a fully interactive and navigable three-dimensional set, whereas 360-degree video captures and presents a spherical or panoramic view of reality without a depth of field and limited interactivity, making tasks like opening a virtual door nearly impossible. However, with today's technology, 360-degree video has stronger capabilities that blur that line.

In this thesis, 360-degree video is assumed to be a type of VR because it fulfils the previously mentioned characteristics. When played on HMDs, 360-degree videos are visualised with head motion tracking, bringing a degree of immersion and a ‘sense of being there’. They can also integrate more austere interactive elements such as buttons or arrows. Additionally, mainstream technology companies have marketed and commercialised 360-degree video as VR, a name that works better for marketing as it is less technical. However, to avoid confusion and controversy, and to be more specific, this thesis uses the term VR to refer to the general technology that uses HMDs, and the term 360-degree video refers to the specific video format that can be played on HMDs.

In recent years, affordable types of VR have become important innovations with significant potential in the tourism industry. VR became increasingly popular after Facebook acquired the Oculus Company in 2014 (Facebook, 2014). Other companies, such as Samsung and Google, started commercialising affordable VR products to the mass market, moving from the early adoption phase to mainstream consumer usage (Yung and Khoo-Lattimore, 2017). Today, the usage of VR varies from the military to medicine to entertainment and video games, the latter being where it found a significant opportunity for development and growth. However, Othman *et al.* (2002) pointed out that this format is an effective form of communication in sets that do not require much interaction, such as promotion, advertising, virtual tours in marketing communications strategies, and exhibitions, achieving a two-way asymmetrical communication. Indeed, this is still true. The format gained popularity during the 2020 Covid-19 pandemic. Places like the British Museum, the Louvre, and tourist attractions offered free 360-degree tours as an alternative for visitors to ease their frustration and boredom during the lockdown. Therefore, this technology offers new ways in which marketers and PR practitioners provide information and interact with their publics.

This thesis proposes that a solid marketing communications and PR strategy could integrate 360-degree video technology. In a country like the UK, where Mexico is mainly seen through the US-American gaze (see Chapter 4), 360-degree video on VR experiences could serve as a tester to awaken a desire to visit and know more. This thesis then takes two towns that are part of the Magical Towns programme and presents a tested VR experience of Tlaquepaque, comparing it with regular promotional material (photographs) from Tequila with participants from the UK. The study concludes that providing VR experiences to potential visitors could raise awareness, help internationalise the Magical Towns programme, and allow Mexico to show itself to the world.

1.2 Research Question, Aims and Objectives

This study explores the potential of 360-degree video in promoting Mexico's cultural tourism. It looks at the Magical Towns programme and its potential for internationalisation, using a case study approach on two towns with the Magical Towns designation: Tequila and Tlaquepaque. A single research question drives the study through four aims with their respective objectives.

1.2.1 Research Question

To what extent can 360-degree video help to promote Mexico's Magical Towns as international tourist destinations?

1.2.2 Aims and Objectives

Aim 1. To discuss the role of marketing communications and Public Relations in destination promotion.

- 1a. To define concepts such as country identity, branding, image, and reputation.
- 1b. To investigate the theoretical background of tourism promotion.
- 1c. To critically examine the role of technology in Public Relations and tourism promotion.

Aim 2. To identify and analyse the factors involved in building Mexico's image and tourism promotion.

- 2a. To assess Mexico's country identity, branding, image, and reputation, drawing on its history and media representations.
- 2b. To critically review Mexico's cultural tourism and its contribution to the country's image and reputation.
- 2c. To explore potential UK visitors' perspectives of Mexico.

Aim 3. To review and analyse the Magical Towns programme and its contribution to Mexico's cultural tourism and promotional strategies.

- 3a. To critically review the operation of the Magical Towns programme.
- 3b. To analyse the Magical Towns programme branding and promotional strategies.

- 3c. To analyse the towns of Tequila and Tlaquepaque with a case study approach exploring their stakeholders' perspectives of the Magical Towns programme.

Aim 4. To assess the potential of 360-degree video as a promotional tool for cultural tourism.

- 4a. To define the concept of VR in its 360-degree video modality by reviewing its evolution.
- 4b. To discuss the applications of 360-degree video in tourism.
- 4c. To test and compare the effectiveness of 360-degree video and photographs in promoting Tequila and Tlaquepaque and its capacity to influence potential visitors' perspectives of Mexico and travel intentions.

1.3 Research Methods

This study uses semi-structured interviews, online questionnaires, and focus groups as data collection methods. On the one hand, semi-structured interviews help explore the reality of people involved in the tourism industry in Tequila and Tlaquepaque, looking at their promotion and communication issues. On the other hand, online questionnaires and focus groups help look at the perception that British travellers that enjoy cultural tourism have of Mexico and their opinions about the potential of 360-video to promote Mexico's Magical Towns programme after having a VR experience. Together, the three methods contribute to having a holistic approach.

This study uses a strategic collective case study approach. It looks at a sample of two towns part of the Magical Towns programme, Tequila and Tlaquepaque, in the state of Jalisco. They are intrinsically interesting because both are in a privileged position, which contrasts with many other towns in the programme. They are located near a major beach resort (Puerto Vallarta) and the second biggest city in Mexico (Guadalajara), which allows them to receive more international visitors than other towns. They are instrumentally useful because both contribute to the country's identity and image through iconic cultural attributes endemic to this region, such as the tequila drink and mariachi music. Furthermore, Tequila was one of the first towns to join the programme, while Tlaquepaque obtained its designation in 2018, and both towns are a one-hour and fifteen minutes from each other, making it easier to visit both towns during the study. These selection criteria helped in exploring both towns individually and as a whole.

Semi-structured interviews with local stakeholders allowed exploring the communication and promotional issues within the towns. The interviewees were representatives of five areas related to tourism in Tequila and Tlaquepaque, namely the public sector, hotels, restaurants, tour operators/guides, and merchants. Many of them actively participate in their local Magical

Towns committee and the tourism promotion of their town. Although most of the interviews were conducted through video calls, some were in person and a few through email exchange (see Chapter 5).

In order to assess the effectiveness of 360-degree video, this study provided a VR experience to a group of participants. As there was no available material to work with, it was necessary to travel to Tequila and Tlaquepaque to film and produce a 360-degree video. That was only possible by borrowing equipment from Newcastle University.

The 360-degree video-making process took place in three stages: pre-production, production, and post-production. The pre-production stage involved developing a script, planning the shots, music, voice-over text and timing. The production stage involved filming the 360-degree video shots in Tlaquepaque using a special six-lens camera and recording the voice-over audio. The post-production involved editing the video, adding the voice-over, music, and effects, and rendering a final video in Newcastle University's Culture Lab. Although the study initially intended to produce two 360-degree videos during the visit, it was only possible to film in one of the two towns (Tlaquepaque) due to technical difficulties. Nonetheless, photographic material was taken in Tequila.

After the editing process, Tlaquepaque's 360-degree video and Tequila's photographs were integrated into an online questionnaire. Participants from special interest groups received a kit at their home addresses that included a cardboard VR viewer with an instruction sheet explaining how to fill in the questionnaire and watch the 360-degree video using their mobile phones and the cardboard VR viewer provided. That was the only possible way to assess participants' VR experience and comply with the government's Covid-19 social distancing restrictions at the time. Filtered and selected respondents were invited to attend one of three virtual focus groups to further expand on the answers by discussing and comparing both promotional formats.

After completing the data collection, a thematic analysis was conducted. The data was recorded, transcribed, imported into Nvivo and classified into two separate data sets. One data set explores the stakeholders' perspectives with data from the interviews, and the other looks at participants' perspectives, mixing the data from the online questionnaire and the focus groups responses. The second data set followed an explanatory sequential research design with the primary focus of the study on the qualitative data. The thematic analysis followed Braun and Clarke (2006) method. Chapter 5 offers a more detailed and expanded methodology.

1.4 Limitations and ethical considerations

In terms of costs, the project had different funding sources. It was partially funded by the Mexican National Council for Science and Technology (CONACYT), covering the PhD tuition fees. The travel and fieldwork expenses were covered with the School of Arts and Cultures (SACS) funds, and the video filming equipment was borrowed from Newcastle University's Culture Lab. The work was limited to the available economic and material resources.

Two principal issues brought challenges during the project: filming technical difficulties and the Covid-19 pandemic. During the 360-degree video filming in Tequila, the camera unexpectedly stopped working, giving a speed error message, and the project had to continue with the footage of only one town (see section 5.5). Moreover, the Covid-19 pandemic seriously affected the Mexican tourism industry, with many stakeholders having limited availability to partake in an interview. The raw video footage was kept locked in the Culture Lab during the University's closure due to the national lockdown, and it could not be edited until the university facilities reopened. Consequently, the focus groups were rescheduled with an eight-month delay and hosted virtually due to the social distancing restrictions. The original research plan and methodology had to be redefined to overcome these challenges (see Chapter 5).

The research topic is not considered sensitive, and therefore, no significant ethical issues arose. This study obtained ethical approval from the Newcastle University Ethics Committee on the 16th of April 2018. All participants in the individual interviews and the focus groups received an information sheet with the description and purpose of the study. All interviewees were required to sign a consent form, and focus group participants gave their recorded consent according to the University's guidelines and regulations. All participants had the option to remain anonymous and withdraw from the study at any time.

The health and safety of all the people involved in the project were essential. Before taking the fieldwork trip, a risk assessment was conducted, taking the appropriate considerations. The in-person interviews took place in public places and safe environments. The focus groups took place online, and all participants were given health and safety information before the VR experience. The priority was always looking after the welfare of the participants.

1.5 Reflexivity and Positionality

Qualitative research is often seen as subjective as it is nearly impossible to be impartial due to the researcher's own biases, personality, and assumptions (Sword, 1999, p. 277). Every researcher's perspective on the world is based on their experiences. That, however, is not necessarily bad, as it enriches the argument from particular viewpoints that other researchers might

not have in the same way. Therefore, it is essential to acknowledge that the researcher is part of the research (Finlay, 1998). It is crucial to state the positionality through a reflexivity exercise to acknowledge and consider the life events and background that influenced this thesis' writing instead of pretending they did not impact the study. Although using the first person is often frowned upon in academic writing, this section is written in the first person as it could not have been done otherwise.

I was born and raised in a small agricultural town in Tamaulipas near the Mexican border with Texas. The state of Tamaulipas is part of what Garreau (1981) and Casagrande (1987) call MexAmerica, and Woodard (2011) refers to as El Norte, one of the North American nations, where Mexicans are perceived as Americanised, and Americans are viewed as Mexicanised by their fellow citizens. With a father from the neighbouring state of Nuevo León, a place founded by Sephardic Jews expelled from Spain and Spaniards born in New Spain (Criollos), and a mother third-generation descendant from a couple made of a southern Mestiza and a Chinese immigrant from Guangdong, I always felt somehow external to 'Mexico'. As a north-eastern Mexican, I lived highly influenced by the US. I grew up consuming media from both sides of the border, and I spent my childhood and youth having shopping weekends in Texas. I was always amazed by all the history and traditions deep-rooted in my country, but I never felt they were mine. Central Mexico always appeared foreign to me, and I was always interested in discovering my own country. When growing up, travelling to central Mexico and the Bajío region, where New Spain flourished, was always like travelling to a foreign land where I could learn about the food, the culture, and what it meant to be truly Mexican. I enjoyed appreciating the reminiscent of ancient cultures and a colonial past rarely seen in Tamaulipas.

I grew up surrounded by new technology. I spent endless childhood hours on the Internet, repairing family computers, and playing with audio, video and photo editing software. My first encounter with the 360-degree format was on Microsoft Encarta. The digital encyclopaedia included a collection of 360-degree photographs from around the world. It helped me learn about the world and imagine I was there for a second. As I grew up, I obtained an Associate Degree in Information Technology, and my interest in technology grew. With the advent of smartphones, I was truly amazed by all their capabilities and opportunities, using their features beyond the standard functionalities. I was always interested in getting the next new thing, and I started exploring things like early AR and creating 360-degree photographs in the early 2010s. I worked briefly as a blogger for a technology and lifestyle magazine, and when VR experienced a second hype in 2016, I became more interested in the format. With the help of my first supervisor, I put all my interests together, materialising this project.

Through my personal experience, I have conducted previous research in the media field. My award-winning bachelor's degree dissertation at the Autonomous University of Tamaulipas studied the evolution of Mexico's public television facing the national analogue switch-off. Moreover, I collaborated as a Research Assistant on a project about the evolution of sexual diversity representations in Mexico's Channel 11, assisting my undergraduate supervisor, who inspired me to become a researcher. I conducted my master's degree dissertation at Newcastle University, looking at Video-On-Demand and youth media consumption habits and obtaining a High Merit grade. My research interest has grown through my years in academia.

I, therefore, acknowledge that all the aforementioned aspects influenced my thesis. I define myself as a relativist as I genuinely believe that our sensorial perception of the world highly depends on our previous experiences. This study is framed by an interpretive paradigm of relativist ontological assumptions, using a qualitative inductive methodology with a case study approach. My previous life experiences influenced my chosen methodology and the data analysis, as research findings do not naturally emerge from the data but are shaped and constructed by the researcher. Thus, this project has been a self-discovering path and a personal ambition to help me understand what Mexico is, how outsiders think about it, and how I can change their perception of Mexico through marketing communications and PR strategies promoting cultural tourism with 360-degree video.

1.6 A brief note about 'America'

Discussing Mexico's tourism and country image without mentioning the US is impossible. This thesis has multiple references to the US but in a particular way that many anglophones might find peculiar. Hence, a clarification note regarding the terminology used when referring to the US is necessary.

The terms 'America' and 'American' have different meanings in different contexts. In English, 'America' can refer to either the landmass holding the Americas or the country of the United States. Likewise, 'American' can refer to either a person from the Americas or a citizen of the United States. However, they are more commonly used to refer to the latter, despite the linguistic ambiguity it causes to some non-native speakers. A six-continental model is widely accepted in many parts outside the anglosphere, including Mexico, where America is assumed as a single continent and not a country. Therefore, people from any country in America are American.

Different Romance languages have exclusive terms to refer to the US. For instance, the formal demonym for the US in French is *étatsunien*, in Italian *statunitense*, in Portuguese

estadunidense, and in Spanish *estadounidense*. An uncommon English adaptation would be *united-statesian*, but it has not been widely adopted.

This thesis uses ‘the US’ to refer to the country and ‘US-American’ as the correspondent demonym to disambiguate the terms. Although this argument could be seen as pedantic, redundant, and even unnecessary for anglophones, it is expected that a large number of the people reading this thesis would come from a Hispanic background where the words America and American have different meanings, and the exclusive use of America and American to refer to the US and its people could be seen as disrespectful. It disregards the American nature of the rest of the people in the American continent as it promotes the assumption that only people from the US are American. Therefore, the deliberated use of US and US-American makes a statement against cultural imperialism, parting from the principle that semantics matter.

1.7 Thesis outline

This thesis is divided into ten chapters. It has an introduction, three background chapters, a methodology chapter, four chapters presenting a thematic analysis, and a discussion and conclusions chapter. Together, they present the argument in a coherently organised way.

Following this introduction, Chapter 2 outlines the theoretical background of marketing communications and PR. This chapter defines the concepts and theories involved in promoting and branding countries and destinations. By doing so, it establishes a theoretical background for the thesis.

Chapter 3 defines the concept of VR and its main characteristics. This chapter discusses the differences between VR and 360-degree video, establishes the concept used throughout this thesis, and outlines this technology’s history and evolution in a timeline. It explores the relationship between technology and tourism and VR applications in tourism. It also critically reviews some literature, outlining its main contributions and gaps in the field.

Chapter 4 outlines the evolution of Mexico’s growing tourism industry. It critically reviews Mexico’s cultural tourism and its contribution to the country’s image and reputation. It assesses Mexico’s country identity, branding, image, and reputation, drawing on its history and media representations. It also critically reviews the operation of the Magical Towns programme outlining its origins and evolution and looking at its aims as a strategy to diversify Mexico’s cultural tourism. This chapter also reviews key literature in the Magical Towns field. This is the third and last background chapter that helps better understand the research context.

Chapter 5 details the methodology used in this thesis. This chapter defines the study’s methodological structure, starting with a discussion about qualitative research, exploring how it is

applied in marketing communications and PR research, and how it is the best approach for this research topic. It also details how semi-structured interviews, questionnaires, and focus groups were used for collecting the data. It outlines the thematic analysis process, limitations of the study, and ethical considerations that arose before, during, and after the study. This chapter gives the basis of the epistemological assumptions and methodological considerations taken when conducting this study.

Chapter 6 analyses Tequila and Tlaquepaque as destinations. This chapter presents the first part of a thematic analysis of the first data set collected through individual semi-structured interviews with stakeholders in the towns. It focuses on the towns' characteristics as destinations, their Magical Town designation, and the local tourist industry challenges. It also looks at the differences between domestic and international visitors in Tequila and Tlaquepaque as well as their behaviour and interactions within the towns from the local stakeholders' perspective. This chapter serves as a first look at the case studies.

Chapter 7 analyses the towns' stakeholders' perspectives on the programme's implementation and operations. This chapter presents the second part of a thematic analysis of the first data set collected through individual semi-structured interviews with stakeholders in the towns. It explores stakeholders' perspectives focusing on the programme's outcomes and their promotional strategies and challenges.

Chapter 8 analyses potential visitors' perspectives of Mexico and the effectiveness of promotional material. This chapter presents the first part of a thematic analysis of the second data set focusing on potential visitors' perspectives. The second data set combined the data from the online questionnaire and the virtual focus groups. This thematic analysis followed an explanatory sequential research design with the primary focus of the study on the qualitative data. This chapter also assesses and compares the effectiveness of 360-degree video and photographs in promoting Tequila and Tlaquepaque and its capacity to influence potential visitors' perspectives of Mexico.

Chapter 9 analyses potential visitors' decision-making process and travel intentions. This chapter presents the second part of a thematic analysis of the second data set focusing on potential visitors' perspectives. As explained, the second data set combined the data from the online questionnaire and the virtual focus groups. This chapter explores essential aspects of their travel decision-making and planning process as well as potential visitors' travel intentions.

Finally, Chapter 10 presents a discussion, drawing conclusions after analysing the data. It looks at recommendations for a real-life scenario in which 360-degree video could promote the Magical Towns programme in the UK. It looks at the opportunities for further research. It answers the research question and explains how this study met the aims and objectives.

Chapter 2. Promotion of tourist destinations

2.1 Introduction

The previous chapter presented a thesis introduction outlining the research context, research question, aims, objectives, methods, limitations, ethical considerations, and thesis structure. This chapter provides conceptual and theoretical background for this study, presenting a discussion on the definitions of the concepts involved in the promotion of destinations and their theoretical implications. It presents the main definitions of marketing communications, PR, and branding, comparing their differences and similarities and establishing the key elements for destination promotion. This chapter explores the way in which countries and destinations are branded and promoted and the theoretical elements that take part in the process, integrating a review of the main theories used in marketing communications and PR research. It also discusses the challenges and opportunities marketing communications and PR face with new technologies and segmented publics. This theoretical background provides the tools to address the research topic, which studies the effectiveness of 360-degree video in promoting Mexico's Magical Towns programme.

This chapter is organised and subdivided into three sections. The first section defines the main marketing communications and PR concepts, outlining the elements that shape the promotional mix. It also presents definitions of other concepts like branding and advertising, exploring how marketing and PR use these tools in their promotional strategies. Furthermore, this section discusses both disciplines' changes, challenges and opportunities in promotional strategies using new technologies to engage with segmented publics. In that way, it brings an overview of how both disciplines attempt to influence public opinion contributing to the construction and promotion of brands and destinations.

The second section reviews the main PR theories in marketing communications and PR research. These theories look at different communication processes from different perspectives. They are classified into Relationship, Social Influence, and Mass Communication theories. These three groups of theories help explore how the publics are influenced by an organisation, their peers, and the media.

The third section explores the concepts of country identity, country brand, country image, and country reputation. It explains a country image theoretical model with key terminology and concepts used in this study. This section also explores the concepts of destination branding and positioning, two crucial elements in promoting destinations. This section is probably, one of the most important sections of this chapter as it presents and frames the elements considered

for developing part of the methodology and analysis. Therefore, this chapter helps define and establish boundaries on the concepts and terminology related to marketing communications and PR used throughout the study. It establishes a crucial conceptual and theoretical background as it is the first step in answering the research question.

2.2 Marketing communications and PR

Defining marketing and PR is a difficult task. There are no universally accepted definitions, as every scholar seems to have their own conceptualisation (see Grunig and Hunt, 1984; Heath and Vasquez, 2001; L'Etang, 2008; Fill and Turnbull, 2016; Morris and Goldsworthy, 2016; CIM, 2017; Cronin, 2018; Moloney and McGrath, 2019; Kotler and Armstrong, 2021; CIPR, n.d.). There are, however, similarities between the two, and both can work together to improve communication strategies. This first section explores some common definitions of marketing and PR, drawing on their similarities and differences. This section also explores branding and advertising as two of their common tools and the challenges of incorporating new technologies into promotional strategies in an era of fragmented audiences.

2.2.1 Definition of marketing communications and PR

Even though marketing is sometimes regarded as solely advertising and selling, it is actually more about communicating with consumers and understanding and satisfying their needs. Kotler and Armstrong (2021, p. 22) say that 'marketing is engaging customers and managing profitable customer relationships' with the two main goals of attracting new customers and maintaining existing ones. These two marketing goals are achieved by promising to satisfy potential customers' needs and providing additional value to satisfy the expectations of the existing ones. Said marketing strategies are conducted through what is known as the marketing mix, commonly conceptualised as the result of combining the 4Ps of Product, Price, Place, and Promotion. The fourth P –promotion– is also known as marketing communications (see section 2.2.2) (CIM, 2017, p. 112; Kotler and Armstrong, 2021, p. 34)

PR has also been widely described as a persuasive activity that influences views and perceptions. In the UK, the Chartered Institute of Public Relations (CIPR, n.d.), defines it as 'the discipline which looks after reputation, with the aim of earning understanding and support and influencing opinion and behaviour'. L'Etang (2008) says that PR can be seen as a communication process involving exchanging different ideas to generate change. Moloney and McGrath (2019, p. 52) state that 'all PR communications are persuasive in their intent because they seek advantage for their producers' playing with reason and emotion. Although there is no consensus

on a definition, a common denominator among all definitions is that PR is a practice that aims to persuade. This may be why PR is often mistakenly perceived by the general public as a tool for manipulation and improving public figures' reputations. However, PR has an essential role in promotion, as it can be used to promote products, places, organisations, ideas, people, or nations (Kotler and Armstrong, 2021, p. 454). Most PR practice highlights an interest in establishing communication between stakeholders of an organisation, between similar organisations, and between governments and their publics (Cronin, 2018, pp. 9-10).

The main difference between marketing and PR is that marketing tends to be more sales-oriented, whereas PR aims at building image, reputation, and changing attitudes. That does not mean, however, that PR cannot impact a company's revenue or that marketing cannot contribute to the positioning of a brand. Indeed, both can complement each other and be used by the commercial and public sectors. The difference between the two is how their messages are structured. The public sector attempts to generate social change rather than obtaining business-related benefits. For instance, the commercial sector influences consumer behaviour with messages like 'buy this' through campaigns that contribute to increasing sales profit. In contrast, the public sector influences social behaviour using messages like 'try this' or 'do this' through campaigns that contribute to social behaviour change (e.g. stop smoking) (Morris and Goldsworthy, 2016, pp. 68-69). In tourism promotion, for instance, businesses would more likely use marketing tools to increase their sales, while tourist boards and government entities would more likely use PR to promote a destination. In practice, PR and marketing usually work together to achieve their goals by taking advantage of each other and developing promotional strategies (Cronin, 2018, p. 10).

2.2.2 The promotional mix

As mentioned in the previous section, the marketing mix consists of the combination of the 4Ps of Product, Price, Place, and Promotion, and the fourth of these Ps -promotion- is what is known as marketing communications or the promotional mix (CIM, 2017, p. 112; Kotler and Armstrong, 2021, p. 34). The promotional mix is the process of sending messages to persuade and provoke a specific targeted audience to modify their behaviour. It is useful to promote organisations and their product offer by emphasising their positive attributes to impact customers' minds (Fill and Turnbull, 2016, p. 13).

The promotional mix integrates a group of tools useful in developing promotional strategies. The promotional mix aims to improve the effectiveness of communication with the targeted audience through the objectives of Differentiate, Reinforce (also Remind or Reassure), Inform,

and Persuade (see Table 2.1) (Fill and Turnbull, 2016, p. 17). In order to accomplish these objectives, the promotional mix employs a set of tools that include advertising, sales promotion, PR, direct marketing, personal selling and a full range of digital marketing techniques that involve social media platforms (Fill and Turnbull, 2016, p. 11; CIM, 2017, p. 112; Kotler and Armstrong, 2021, pp. 410-411). Each of these tools employs its own promotional strategies using different resources. For instance, advertising usually uses online, mobile or broadcast resources. Sales promotions generate coupons, discount campaigns, and demonstrations. Personal selling relies on trade shows, fairs, and incentives. PR uses events, electronic and editorial tools, as well as publications through the different types of Paid, Earned, Shared, and Owned media (Dietrich, 2014), and direct marketing utilises postal mail, catalogues, email, and social media, among others (Kotler and Armstrong, 2021, p. 411).

Task	Sub-task	Explanation
Differentiate	Position	To make a product or service stand out in the category
Reinforce	Remind, reassure, refresh	To consolidate and strengthen previous messages and experiences
Inform	Make aware, educate	To make known and advise of availability and features
Persuade	Purchase or make further enquiry	To encourage further positive purchase-related behaviour

Table 2.1. The DRIP model (Fill and Turnbull, 2016, p. 17).

2.2.3 Branding

In the same way as previous concepts, there is no universally agreed definition of what a brand is. A visual approach was highly adopted and explored by Assael (1990 cited in Fill and Turnbull, 2016, p. 291), who defined a brand as the name, symbol, packaging, and service reputation of an organisation or entity. Kotler and Armstrong (2021, p. 240) expanded on this by giving a more comprehensive definition that says that a brand is ‘a name, term, sign, symbol, or design or a combination of these that identifies the products or services of one seller or group of sellers and differentiates them from those of competitors’. Brands are, therefore, intentional self-representations of organisations or entities that distinguish them from their competitors.

Branding is an important component of promotional strategies. Branding is the design and promotion of a brand that differentiates an organisation or entity from its competitors. Its goal is to ensure that customers and publics understand and recognise the brand’s meaning and how it differs from others. Fill and Turnbull (2016, p. 295) say that ‘the way in which marketing communications are used to build brands, is determined strategically by the role that the brand is expected to play in achieving an organisation’s goals’. The process of branding is so strong in modern life that hardly anything is unbranded. From foods to goods, products, places, and services, brands are everywhere, helping consumers to identify manufacturers and helping

manufacturers to differentiate themselves from others. Brands may also convey a quality message, generating feelings of trust and loyalty (Kotler and Armstrong, 2021, p. 242).

Personality is one of the most important elements of a brand. A brand's personality is determined by its lifestyle characteristics and perceived values. Those characteristics and values make brands seem bland, exciting, boring, cool, or even adventurous. A brand's personality helps to differentiate it by allowing it to project a variety of human traits and attributes, such as sincerity, excitement, competence, sophistication, and ruggedness (Aaker, 1997, p. 351; Fill and Turnbull, 2016, p. 297; Kotler and Armstrong, 2021, p. 162). Consumers generally choose brands that match their personality and interests or those with which they feel identified. These characteristics and identity values create links with consumers, enhancing the perception of a given product's quality, utility, and desirability. Therefore, when people make brand choices, they also make significant decisions regarding their lifestyle, creating social and emotional relationships with brands (Morgan and Pritchard, 2008).

2.2.4 Advertising

Advertising is one of the mass communication tools often used by marketing communications. Advertising is good for building brands, raising awareness, improving and promoting brand relationships, and establishing and maintaining a positive reputation with consumers (Smith, 2002, p. 299). Advertising is very impersonal and expensive, but it is a very flexible tool with a long history of success in reaching large numbers of people. However, one of its disadvantages is the lack of credibility. Audiences are less likely to believe messages that they get through paid media than the ones they get through other marketing tools (Fill, 2013, p. 24). Therefore, no matter how much money is spent on advertising, it only works if it engages with consumers and communicates correctly (Kotler and Armstrong, 2021, p. 441).

The AIDA model of advertising, developed by E. St. Elmo Lewis in the late 1800s, outlines the four steps consumers go through when engaging with an advertisement. The acronym stands for Attention, Interest, Desire, and Action. To effectively market a product or service, advertisers, marketing communications, and PR practitioners must first grab the Attention of potential customers through sensory techniques and appealing visuals. They must create Interest and Desire for the product by providing information, demonstrations, and emotional appeals. Finally, they must encourage Action by offering promotions and discounts and highlighting the product's benefits. The success of an advertisement depends on its ability to convert a viewer's interest into a strong desire and ultimately lead to a purchase.

In the case of tourism, where destinations are the product, the AIDA model is useful for successful promotional campaigns. Tourism campaigns often present stunning photographs and video footage highlighting natural beauty, architecture, and cultural attributes to grab Attention, Interest and generate a Desire to visit. These are also often complemented by catchy slogans and a call to action. However, potential visitors have the last word, as many other factors (such as time, distance, and price) could prevent a Desire to become an Action.

Regardless of the company's strategy or tools, a successful promotional message must appeal to the target publics. It is crucial to establish a connection based on their values and perceptions. Advertising helps consumers establish rational and emotional associations with a brand. The former focuses on the functionality and benefits the brand can offer the consumer, often emphasising the product's performance. The latter focuses on the psychological factors that create positive feelings and attitudes towards the brand (Fill, 2002, pp. 349-350). A message could be predominantly oriented to show the characteristics and features of a product, or it could be predominantly oriented to transmit emotions to the receiver. The main difference in choosing a presentation style lies in 'the degree of factual information transmitted in a message against the level of imagery' (Fill and Turnbull, 2016, p. 557). Successful brands create strong and positive associations in the minds of consumers in such a way that it becomes easy for them to remember them (Fill, 2002, p. 339).

Developing promotional strategies at an international level, however, can be challenging. International marketing and PR can overcome challenges, including cultural differences, media availability, media credibility, media characteristics, costs, legal restrictions, competition, language, and different media standards and formats (Smith, 2002, pp. 241-242). In some cases, organisations unify their campaigns. McDonald's, for instance, uses its 'I'm loving it' slogan worldwide, and Snickers expanded its 'You're not you when you're hungry' campaign to 80 countries (Kotler and Armstrong, 2021, p. 435). Thus, it is important to develop strategies considering the context in which they will be implemented.

2.2.5 Promotion and new technologies

New technologies have made it possible to establish new promotional techniques and strategies. Through new technologies, new ways of communicating have emerged, and consequently, communication has become more targeted and personalised. With the help of new technologies, organisations can reach a wider and more specific audience and engage directly with customers and publics. The use of social media, online video platforms, and mobile devices has contributed to classifying and grouping users as individuals who share certain characteristics. Thus,

marketing communications develop messages tailored to different audiences, in a phenomenon known as ‘audience fragmentation’ and ‘mass personalisation’.

Smith (2002) pointed out that the promotion of mass-produced goods on mass media messages directed to a mass market is over. According to Goldsmith (1999, p. 179), marketing has evolved, targeting smaller and smaller markets over time. Marketers have moved from traditional mass marketing to market segmentation, niche marketing, micro-marketing, mass customisation, and finally, achieving personalisation. Today, all of them coexist in more complex strategies at different times. According to Fill and Turnbull (2016, pp. 24-25), this has resulted in a shift from one-way communications (where marketing communications and PR attempted to persuade) to two-way communications that provide more interaction with very specific target audiences. Whilst in the old days, companies used to establish mass communication with mass marketing, today, all the communication and marketing promotion is made for segmented publics (Kotler and Armstrong, 2021, p. 37) using different combinations of the promotional mix with new technologies providing endless interactive possibilities.

New technologies and fragmented audiences give the opportunity (and challenge) to communicate by directing specific messages to specific types of people. This process is often referred to as mass personalisation. According to Kuksa *et al.* (2022, p. 3), personalisation refers to the process of tailoring something to meet a person’s specific needs. However, the concept of personalisation is not dependent on technology. Media production and communication technologies only ease the process, allowing for a more automated personalisation, which once was manual, required many resources, and was time-consuming (Kuksa *et al.*, 2022, p. 9). Today, new technologies allow personalised exposure to advertising. In the physical world, the publics are exposed to established seasonal campaigns like advertising holidays and gifts during Christmas or back-to-school laptop sales in the late summer. In the digital world, promotional strategies have evolved into different formats and more creative methods. Algorithms, personalised searches, and online strategies provide individually targeted advertisements in a ‘filter bubble’ that only shows what the individual is interested in (Pariser, 2011). Thus, personalisation should not be reduced to the technology used to accomplish it, but technology certainly has a crucial role in executing and achieving it (Kuksa *et al.*, 2022, p. 7).

The continuous sophistication of AI applications and the availability of Big Data tools allow an unprecedented power for mass personalisation (Hermann, 2021, p. 1259). Machine-learning algorithms allow platforms to display real-time personalised content as users scroll through social media and websites. AI tools allow profiling customers with information that is helpful to infer characteristics and behaviours to make predictions and provide options that they are more likely to purchase. For instance, social media allows targeting advertisements and

sponsored content for a specific demographic. Online shops collect and analyse data to create messages that a potential consumer can consider relevant. Said messages are often in the form of shopping lists, reminders to buy something left in the shopping cart, alerts of a product back in stock, or a list of products based on the customer's recently purchased items. Organisations can now decide what advertisements or alerts to show or send to users based on the types of content they enjoy, when to email them, and what messaging style to use (Kuksa *et al.*, 2022, p. 10). However, this type of AI-driven mass personalisation raises ethical concerns. Hermann (2021) identified ethical issues related to privacy, agency, transparency, and echo chambers.

In 1996 Martin Sorrel (cited in Smith, 2002, p. 298) predicted that 'brand advertising in the next 20 years is going to demand a great deal more than the ability to write, produce, and place a 30-second spot on network television'. His prediction came true as new ways of advertising require more complex strategies. The concept of strategy refers not only to the combination of different tools in the promotional mix but to how these tools are incorporated into a sequence plan of activities. For instance, QR codes finally took off in the UK during the Covid-19 pandemic, allowing the general public to adopt them, and they can be used to connect offline promotional materials with online platforms (Fill and Turnbull, 2016, p. 457). Also, platforms like Snapchat, Instagram, Facebook, and WhatsApp have incorporated new ways of presenting content. Story formats, for instance, have led advertisers and PR practitioners to adjust strategies, formats, and video standards to develop mobile-friendly vertical 15-second videos. Advertisers need to think outside the box to find new and better ways to communicate with the younger generation.

Another example is the video platform TikTok. Using short vertical videos, advertisers have adapted to TikTok's content-creation model, which requires a lot of creativity to quickly catch and retain the viewer's attention. Kotler and Armstrong (2021, p. 548) attribute TikTok's popularity to its great user experience that shows personalised content with fun features, and to the fact that it was initially ad-free. TikTok's technology not only provides fun tools that stimulate creativity and encourage all users to become content creators but also feeds *lurkers* with personalised content based on an algorithm that learns from the content they interact with. TikTok is not ad-free anymore, and organisations use marketing communications and PR to produce paid TikTok ads, engage in viral trends and use consumer-generated marketing strategies since viral videos are the digital equivalent of word-of-mouth (Kotler and Armstrong, 2021, p. 502).

With the development of VR technology, advertisers are integrating persuasive messages into VR experiences. Wu *et al.* (2022) identified five types of VR advertising: 360-degree videos, big-screen 2D videos, 3D models, interactive objects, and 2D banners. A common technique for integrating advertisements into VR is to embed any 'regular' 2D video or banner as a

big screen into the virtual environment. ‘Inserting’ their traditional ads within a VR experience is perhaps the cheapest and easiest way for advertisers to integrate their content. This is because they do not have to create anything new or deal with more sophisticated production processes. Using 2D videos and 2D banners in a virtual environment would be similar to pop-up videos on a website. However, a 360-degree video, such as the promotional video used in this study, is a more elaborate and immersive way to provide an advertisement in VR. A study conducted by OmniVirt (2019) revealed that immersive types of VR advertisements, such as 360-degree videos, are more engaging, perform better, and experience fewer skips than traditional 2D advertisements.

2.3 PR theories

PR and marketing communications research (and practice) often draw upon a variety of theories. Topić (2017) classify these communication theories into three main categories, namely relationship theories (systems theory and situational theory), social influence theories (social exchange theory and social learning theory), and mass communication theories (agenda-setting theories and framing theory). The three categories explore how communication is conducted in different settings to persuade the publics. They are based on the assumption that communication itself has a persuasive nature, as it is meant to influence others’ opinions (Jowett and O'Donnell, 2006). The purpose of this section is to provide a short review of those three categories of theories and their applications in PR and marketing communications research.

2.3.1 Relationship theories

The first group is relationship theories. As the name suggests, this group examines how PR establishes relationships between stakeholders through communication. Systems theory and situational theory have explored such relationships. On the one hand, in systems theory, PR is analysed from the perspective of practitioners in an organisation that aims to benefit from PR activities (Edwards, 2014). Situational theory, on the other hand, subdivides the publics of this communication process according to their interests. Neither theory contradicts the other, but instead, they complement each other.

Grunig and Hunt (1984) developed early research on systems theory. They classified PR practice into four categories: ‘press agency/publicity’, ‘public information’, ‘two-way asymmetric communication’, and ‘two-way symmetric communication’. Their ‘two-way asymmetric’ communication model is particularly focused on persuasion and how organisations attempt to change their public’s perception. In this model, ‘the power lies with the sender, whose

intention is to persuade the receiver to accept and support the sender organisation' (Harrison, 2000, p. 46). It is important to highlight that Grunig and Hunt's models were developed over 30 years ago when mass media dominated communications.

The world and the way stakeholders communicate have changed. The evolution of technology and the rise of new media brought the need for changes in systems theories, rethinking the way in which the publics and organisations behave. Researchers like Sheldrake (2011) have developed new marketing communication models that examine people's behaviour and interactions on social media platforms, where two-way symmetric communication is more prevalent than ever. As a result of this type of communication, systems theory has classified organisations into two categories: open system organisations and closed system organisations. While the former seeks feedback from the publics to build relationships, the latter does not look for feedback but instead operates on their own preferences and experiences (Topić, 2017, p. 151).

Situational theory examines the relationships between publics and organisations. Grunig and Repper (1992) argued that although organisations should establish effective communication with their stakeholders, this is not always possible as not every stakeholder is interested in doing so. Grunig and Hunt (1984) divided the publics into four categories based on their common views on an issue: 'non-public' (no impact from the organisation), 'latent' (endangered by the organisation but no collective action), 'aware' (recognises the existence of an issue), and 'active' (recognises the existence of an issue and takes action). Thus, this theory focuses on how segmentation can help to communicate only with the interested publics. To accomplish this, it identifies and catalogues the publics as members of 'subgroups' that need special attention from organisations. Grunig and Hunt (1984, p. 149) divided the already grouped publics into two main subgroups based on the dependent variables: those who only process information (i.e. passive communication behaviour) and those who seek information (i.e. active communication behaviour). During a political campaign, for instance, only active voters are given attention.

Both relationship theories complement each other and explore the behaviour of the publics and organisations in communication processes. Systems theory focuses more on exploring the way in which organisations engage with the publics, whereas situational theory explores the way publics behave as part of a group. Both help to structure and target messages more effectively. There is, however, another set of theories that further explore how publics behave by interacting and learning from each other in a process known as social influence.

2.3.2 Social influence theories

The second group are the social influence theories. This group of theories includes the social exchange theory and the social learning theory. Essentially, social exchange theory argues that people's decision-making process is determined by 'costs and rewards'; therefore, human behaviour can be predicted. In contrast, social learning theory aims to predict human behaviour by analysing how people process and interpret media content, which occurs naturally as a result of peer influence. Both theories look at the influence of social interactions.

Social exchange theory was initially developed by Thibaut and Kelley (1959), who argued that people make decisions based on the benefits they will receive or their 'costs and rewards'. Social exchange theory is not exclusive to marketing communications and PR; it has been used extensively in a variety of communication studies areas, including organisational communication and interpersonal communication. Nevertheless, PR and marketing researchers should consider this theory when designing and developing their research since people act depending on perceived benefits (Topić, 2017, pp. 154-155). For instance, giving something in exchange is always a good idea when conducting surveys or working with focus groups.

The social learning theory explores the way in which the publics learn from each other. It traces its origins back to the 1950s when Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955) first identified people with the ability to process information to influence others. They studied US-American electoral behaviour and concluded that people make decisions based on what others say more than from the mass media influence. Bandura (1977) found that people also repeat behaviour patterns to be a part of what they consider trendy, cool, or even rewarding. Thus, social learning theory explores and describes the behaviour of individuals and groups that influence and are influenced by each other.

There are two groups of people that influence the publics: opinion leaders and opinion formers. For Rogers (2003), the so-called opinion leaders tend to be 'more cosmopolite than their followers' and have 'higher socioeconomic status than their followers'. Similarly, opinion formers are individuals that influence other people's decisions and behaviour. Opinion formers, however, do so due to their authority, experience, expertise, or high status in relation to the matter. As a result of their perceived expertise, higher education, or superiority, people look to them for information and advice (Fill and Turnbull, 2016, p. 55). In today's digital world, social learning plays a profound role on social media as it provides a platform for people to share and exchange experiences, information, opinions, and entertainment content with others with similar interests (Sheldrake, 2011; Topić, 2017).

Mass-followed Twitter accounts, reviews on shopping websites like Amazon, travel sites like TripAdvisor, and unboxing videos on YouTube, integrate a multiplatform system in which both opinion leaders and opinion formers coexist. That brings extraordinary opportunities for marketing communications and PR practitioners to approach segmented audiences with paid, earned and shared strategies. For instance, influencer marketing partners ‘with individuals who have a significant audience and influence within a particular segment’. It does so because ‘influencers can drive a message – often in the form of original or co-created content – to the masses or to a micro-targeted audience’ (CIPR, 2020, p. 2). This could include paying influencers to review a product or a service or inviting them to participate in events. Similarly to influencer marketing, celebrity endorsements involve paying celebrities from reality shows and entertainment industries to endorse products on social media (Escalas and Bettman, 2015).

Both traditional and new media have permeated society to different extents and affected different publics. There has been a process of mediatisation in which ‘culture and society to an increasing degree become dependent on the media and their logic’ (Hjarvard, 2013, p. 17). Mediatisation is also used to study the relationship between PR, media, technology, and cultural change. Traditional and new media have integrated into society to the extent that many social interactions are increasingly taking place through different types of media (Davidson, 2017, p. 31). Despite social media platforms’ strong influence on the publics, mass communication remains prevalent since not everyone has access to them.

2.3.3 Mass communication theories

The third group consists of mass communication theories. This group includes agenda-setting and framing. Both are used to influence public perceptions of specific topics presented in the media. McCombs and Shaw (1972) introduced the concept of agenda-setting to study and better understand the big media industry and its role in setting the agenda and influencing daily conversation. Wu and Coleman (2009, p. 776) defined it as ‘the phenomenon of the mass media selecting certain issues and portraying them frequently and prominently, which leads people to perceive those issues as more important than others’. Agenda setting can improve or deteriorate the image and reputation of individuals, organisations, and even tourist destinations. To accomplish that, media often uses different elements and resources, such as the order in which the content is presented, the headlines’ sizes, or deciding the front cover’s story (Carroll and McCombs, 2003; McQuail, 2005; Wu and Coleman, 2009).

In essence, framing is the selection and salience of certain aspects of reality to make them appear more important, prominent or salient through a media message. Framing is the way in

which information is presented and how it influences the way it is perceived (Davidson, 2017, p. 27). In this way, framing helps promote specific definitions, interpretations, and judgements about a topic (Entman, 1993), and therefore, it helps the agenda-setting process with its aimed discourse (McQuail, 2005).

Both marketing communications and PR use agenda-setting and framing to enhance the image of individuals and organisations. On the one hand, publicity and paid media help to impose a topic of conversation among the publics. On the other hand, how messages and campaigns are presented and framed influences the audiences' perception. Thus, agenda-setting and framing aim to influence public opinion about a particular issue, individual, or organisation.

Social media plays a vital role in setting the cyber agenda. The cyber agenda is set by a mix of traditional media corporations sharing their content, opinion leaders and formers giving their opinions, users generating creative content, and users sharing fake news daily. For instance, Twitter trending topic lists are a great example of how people engage in conversations. Although PR is mainly used to influence an organisation's stakeholders, sometimes it aims to influence public opinion directly (Roberts-Bowman, 2016, p. 30). Becoming a trending topic on Twitter is often seen as a good PR tool. Who controls the trending topics controls the agenda and, therefore, the conversation. For that reason, Twitter sells space on the trending topic lists to companies, so they can promote their campaigns, making people talk about them.

However, the definition of public opinion has been the subject of debate. Two approaches are commonly used in different definitions. There are those who follow Rousseau's view of the 'general will', and there are those who define it as the average opinion of a majority or the opinion that matters most (L'Etang and Pieczka, 1996). In any case, L'Etang (2008) concludes that public opinion is not static; it is a constantly changing process. PR practitioners should be able to identify and be aware of what people say and think about current trends and issues. However, determining what the general public thinks about a topic is more complex than asking 'yes or no' questions.

Changes in public opinion can be studied using Jefkins' Transfer Process. Jefkins (1994) developed a 'Transfer Process' that examines the way negative attitudes could be transferred into positive ones (Baines *et al.*, 2004) (see Figure 2.1). His theory listed negative attitudes that could be transferred into positive achievements to generate understanding. He suggested transferring hostility to sympathy, prejudice to acceptance, apathy to interest, and ignorance to knowledge (Duhé, 2007, p. 290). However, this is not always easily achieved. There are other factors that influence people, such as those studied by Rogers (2003) in his proposed diffusion of innovations model. He explained that people often need to be convinced about new ideas. In order to adopt positive attitudes towards new technologies, people must see their effectiveness,

be convinced that they are easy to use, or even wait for a price reduction before they can recognise their advantages. The commercialisation of VR HMDs is a good example (see Chapter 3). They firstly gained relevance in the gaming industry, but the opportunities for their use in education, medicine, sports, design, and entertainment as a ‘new communication platform’ became evident later (Gurău, 2007; Zuckerberg, 2014, cited in Yaxley, 2016, p. 458).

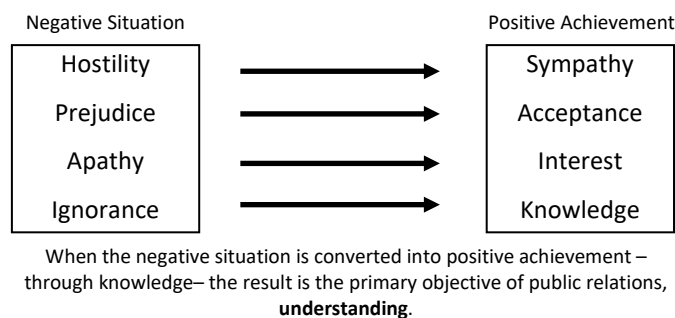


Figure 2.1. The Public Relations Transfer Process (Jefkins, 1994, p. 7)

After reviewing the three categories of Relationship, Social Influence, and Mass Communication theories, it can be concluded that the three types of theories attempt to research and position PR and marketing communications from different points of view. Relationship theories study how organisations communicate with their publics. Social influence theories analyse how individuals behave and interact with organisations and their peers and how they influence and learn from each other. Mass communication theories explore how mass media frame and transmit messages and how PR and marketing communications use them to shape public opinion on specific topics. Influencing public opinion can help to improve the image and reputation of individuals, organisations, or even nations.

2.4 Country image and destination branding

One of the goals of marketing and PR in promoting countries and tourist destinations is to improve their image. According to Barich and Kotler (1991, p. 95), image is ‘the sum of beliefs, attitudes, and impressions that a person or group of persons has of an object’. Image is intrinsically related to reputation, defined as ‘the result of what you do, what you say and what others say about you’ (CIPR, n.d.). According to Buhmann (2016), people’s attitudes and actions towards organisations are influenced by their perceptions. The way people perceive the world depends on their experiences, stimuli, and interpretations. People are daily exposed to many stimuli, some in the form of advertisements that constantly bombard them. From television advertisements, billboards on the street, buses, magazines, websites, emails, or social media

platforms, the sensory organs choose those that are most relevant and attractive. Such natural interpretations impact everyday attitudes, motivations and values (Fill, 2002, p. 63), creating the image people have of things. This section explores the concepts of country identity, branding, image, and reputation, as well as the concepts of destination branding and marketing. Such elements are involved in the marketing and promotional strategies of destinations.

2.4.1 Country identity, brand, image, and reputation

While concepts like country identity, country brand, country image, and country reputation differ in fields like psychology, communication science, and business studies, Buhmann (2016) proposes classifying these concepts according to the type of perception. This concept classification can be represented in a graph with two axes (see Figure 2.2), differentiating them according to the perspective from which they are constructed. In this graphic representation, they fall under either self-perception (by a domestic population) or outside perception (by a foreign public). In that sense, while the concept of country identity and country brand are processes based on the self-perception of the country's citizens, country image and country reputation refer to the perception of foreign publics (Rusciano *et al.*, 1997).

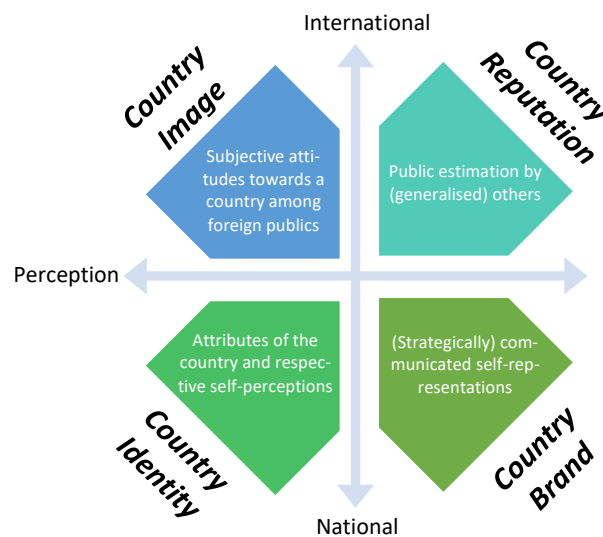


Figure 2.2. A coordinative framework of country image, reputation, brand and identity (Buhmann, 2016, p. 37).

Both country identity and country brand are constructed from the perspective of domestic publics with their perceptions of themselves as a country and what they wish to convey to the outside world. On the one hand, country identity is the mix of attributes and values a country owns based on a self-perception. These attributes could include public culture, history and

traditions, the national economy, values and norms, and even the country's own territory (Buhmann, 2016, p. 42). On the other hand, country brand refers to the self-representation of a country that can contain elements of its identity and be promoted externally to differentiate itself from the rest of the world. A nation brand could be defined as 'the unique, multi-dimensional blend of elements that provide the nation with culturally grounded differentiation and relevance for all of its target audiences' (Dinnie, 2022).

Both country image and reputation are constructed from the perspective of foreign publics and with the perceptions, ideas, concepts, and representations they associate a country with. On the one hand, country image is an international process that is determined by the attitudes that foreign publics have towards a country, which are based on their own perceptions and experiences (Buhmann, 2016, p. 38). It is 'the cognitive representation that a person holds about a given country' (Kunczik, 2003, p. 412). On the other hand, country reputation encompasses the general estimation of the foreign publics towards a country, and it is mainly constructed by communicated images and media representations. As opposed to country image, country reputation is not an individual's attitude but the general public's esteem towards a country, and it is based on social, not individual judgements (Emler, 1990, p. 181). However, the brand personality is not included in Buhmann's model since it is associated with both country identity and country image (Papadopoulos, 2019, p. 17).

It is important for countries to have a good image among foreign publics since it has a significant impact on various areas. It could benefit countries in terms of improving international relations, foreign investments, political stability, and cultural attractiveness, an important aspect of cultural tourism. The image of a country is becoming increasingly important in our globalised world, as now, more than ever, international organisations are constantly observing countries, and bad news can spread very quickly through online platforms. Furthermore, branding has expanded beyond product brands to cover entities like cities and countries.

The concept of nation branding was firstly developed by Anholt (2005; 2009) under the idea that countries can brand themselves with something that represents them in the same way products are branded. Country branding naturally emerged from the need to stand out in an increasingly competitive world of exports, investments and tourism (Tasci, 2011, p. 126). According to Newbury and Song (2019, pp. 50-51), definitions of country brand usually include the term 'reputation', overlapping the concepts of country brand and country reputation. The main difference is that country brand represents a nation's attempt to communicate and project a self-representation to external audiences, whereas country reputation is the general perception of foreign publics. However, country brands can indeed contribute to improving a country's reputation. The purpose of country branding is to Differentiate a country from others, Remind the

publics about its existence, Inform the public about its values and identity, and Persuade them to engage with the country (Fill and Turnbull, 2016). Country brands should not be seen as exclusively tourism-oriented but as versatile identifications that, besides helping to attract tourists, also help to stimulate investments and to boost exports (Dinnie, 2008; Newburry and Song, 2019).

While country brands are very diverse, they all attempt to reflect the country's identity in some way. Some countries use their own flag or national colours, and some others use relevant symbols that are part of the country's imagery (e.g. animals, food, clothing). Others prefer to show representative natural elements or iconic attractions or landmarks such as the Eiffel Tower or Big Ben. Other countries just prefer to use abstract symbols or designs that look trendy or fresh (Tasci, 2011, p. 121). For instance, Mexico's country brand represents the country's diversity in an abstract, symbolic, and iconographic way (see section 4.3). This last characteristic is commonly seen when hosting or participating in international sports competitions. All country brands, however, always include the country's name, as this cannot be changed just for the sake of branding and promotion.

Similarly, brands are also part of specific tourist destinations. Branding and marketing a destination aim to increase tourism income. The goal of destination branding is to attract recurrent visitors, first-timers, and non-visitors. In the same way as country brands, successful destination brands differentiate the destination from others. In addition, it helps to differentiate its products and communicate its values and quality, evoking expectations and emotions. However, a good branded destination must have the right infrastructure (i.e. transportation, electricity, telecommunications, clean water) and superstructure (i.e. health services, security, environment, heritage and cultural preservation). Having these elements correctly positioned will affect the satisfaction of visitors' needs, which is essential for a good tourist destination. If these elements are not up to the visitors' expected standards, no matter how big the branding efforts are, the result will be a failure (Tasci, 2011, p. 117).

Despite the fact that most tourist destinations have a brand that represents and differentiates them from other destinations, not all destinations have a brand strategy. Destinations are often promoted only through inconsistent advertising campaigns with very limited engagement with the publics. As a result, potential visitors have an ambiguous impression of the destination. To improve their image and reputation, destinations should have a clear branding project combined with promotional activities (Munar, 2009, pp. 30-31). The process of branding a destination, therefore, involves more than just promoting and advertising it. However, every destination is different and has its own unique features, so there is no standardised formula for branding them (Tasci, 2011). They are composite products that combine goods and services such as

accommodation, tour operators, attractions, natural elements, heritage, culture, entertainment, crafts, and arts (Buhalis, 2000). The combination of business, natural, and human elements, makes destination branding a process that involves research, management, and marketing communications.

2.4.2 Aesthetic dimension

Buhmann (2016) developed a country image model made of four dimensions. In his country image model, he combined the concept of national identity proposed by Smith (1986), the attitude theory formulated by Ajzen and Fishbein (1980), and, more importantly, a three-dimensional corporate reputation model consisting of constructs developed by Ingenhoff and Sommer (2007) and Eisenegger and Imhof (2008). There were originally three dimensions of corporate reputation: functional (abilities and competencies), normative (integrity), and emotional (sympathy and fascination). To measure country image, he adapted the corporate reputation model into a four-dimensional model comprising of a functional (national economy and political organisation), a normative (norms and values), an aesthetic (public culture, traditions, and landscapes), and an emotional dimension (feelings, sympathy, and fascination).

In order to adapt the model, an extra dimension measuring the aesthetic features of a country was developed. The original model developed by Eisenegger and Imhof (2008) included some aesthetic features as part of the emotional dimension. However, Ingenhoff and Sommer (2007) conceptualised the emotional dimension as the result of functional and normative judgments, leaving no room for integrating aesthetic country features like public culture, traditions, or landscapes. Buhmann and Ingenhoff (2015) concluded that aesthetic features ought to be considered as important as functional and normative features and, therefore, form a separate dimension that also impacts the emotional dimension. Without that extra dimension, all the aesthetic attributes would be wrongly considered as outcomes of functional and normative judgements.

The aesthetic dimension measures beliefs and judgements related to a country's aesthetic qualities. Buhmann (2016, p. 87) defined aesthetic qualities as a country's 'beauty and attractiveness as a cultural and scenic place'. Based on his research into the aesthetic attributes that affect country image most, he outlined four elements that comprise the aesthetic dimension: Cultural goods, Culinary, History and traditions, and Landscape and scenery. In this study, those four components of the aesthetic dimension of country image are used in an online questionnaire and focus groups to gauge potential visitors' views of Mexico and the visual representations they associate with it. However, to get a better picture of the visual representations that potential visitors associate with Mexico, Landscape and scenery was subdivided into Rural

landscape and scenery and Urban landscape and scenery. Chapter 5 presents a detailed outline of how this study used those components of the aesthetic dimension.

2.4.3 Destination marketing

Destination marketing involves several actions and strategies through tools such as advertising, personal selling, websites, direct marketing, and brochures. Destinations, just as products, are marketed following the 4P-marketing mix (see section 2.2) (Tasci, 2011). However, Morgan and Pritchard (2008, p. 161) noted that marketers and PR practitioners need to contend with two further P's, namely Politics and Paucity. The former related to all political aspects involved in destination marketing, and the latter related to the lack of control associated with having too many stakeholders. Destination marketers are constantly pressured by political interests to promote an image and identity that appeals to certain government groups and different public and private stakeholders. In order to market a place, several stakeholders at different levels of civil society and government are involved. At the local, regional, and national levels, it involves tourism offices, commissions, tourism development bureaus, chambers of commerce, hotels, restaurants, attractions, and non-governmental organisations (Tasci, 2011, p. 117). These elements and stakeholders are beyond the control of destination marketers. Thus, destination branding and marketing are less about management and more about cooperation and coordination between local, regional, and national stakeholders (Morgan and Pritchard, 2008).

In destination marketing, branding a destination is not enough; it also needs to be positioned in the market and the visitors' minds. Positioning a destination brand requires consideration of three main factors. They are the market segments, the image of the destination brand in different segments, and the strong destination brand features (Tasci, 2011, p. 118). In order to address these three factors, tourism is often diversified to attract a variety of markets with varying needs and interests. Additionally, diversification often involves branding individual attractions or grouping attractions by type of tourism product. However, these brands are usually associated with a parent brand that represents all the values included in the sub-brands. For instance, the Magical Towns brand exists as the graphic representation of one of many programmes in Mexico's tourism under Mexico's country brand. The individual brands of the towns in the programme are, at the same time, sub-brands of the Magical Towns brand (see section 4.6.3). Multi-brand strategies often include catchy slogans to keep target markets' attention, some of which are associated with specific campaigns. Positioning campaigns are also part of the promotion process.

Promoting a destination is about telling the world of its existence, inviting tourists to visit, and transmitting the values set through destination branding. Place promotion is defined as ‘the conscious use of publicity and marketing to communicate selective images of specific geographical localities or areas to a target audience’ (Gold and Ward, 1994, p. 2). This is an important aspect of destination branding since it maintains and reinforces the brand, representing the destination until the actual visit takes place. The purpose is to promote awareness and interest among potential visitors, stimulating a desire to visit the destination. It is often achieved through visual tools such as promotional videos, posters, brochures, online advertising on travel blogs, and social media. Promotional material should be realistic, favourable, and representative of the destination’s reality. Otherwise, this could have the opposite effect, disappointing the visitor by not fulfilling their expectations when they actually visit the destination (Tasci, 2011, p. 119).

PR plays a key role in promoting a destination. The process involves establishing partnerships and relationships with tour operators, hotels, event organizers, agencies, governments, and journalists (Tasci, 2011, p. 119). PR then assists in dealing with all the stakeholders organising media campaigns, events, roadshows, lobbying, and organising and attending tourism fairs. Some marketing and PR strategies to promote destinations include raising awareness by encouraging the use of destinations as film locations, hosting and sponsoring big sports events, and inviting journalists and writers to their promotional activities (Morgan and Pritchard, 2008, p. 162). Additionally, PR can assist in handling crises that could affect destinations. PR can help by implementing contingency plans and establishing good relationships between stakeholders and the publics, handling negative events and negative news media stories.

In promotion strategies, countries and destinations deliberately choose the aspects and characteristics they want to promote and highlight. Communications are not objective since they only communicate what the country wants to convey to create positive associations in the minds of the targeted publics. However, this should not be seen as false advertising or misinformation in branding campaigns but as exploiting and capitalising on the destination’s strengths and the publics’ expectations. There are many countries, for example Italy, that use their cuisine to promote themselves internationally (Sevin, 2019, p. 245). The majority of publicity that affects a destination’s image is unplanned and unrelated to tourism.

There are times, however, when destinations cannot choose what to promote about themselves. It is impossible for news media to comprehensively cover what is going on in foreign countries, and therefore, they select prominent aspects of the most relevant news highlighting some aspects while ignoring others. For example, the negative news reports about Mexico’s War on Drugs affect Mexico’s tourism promotion. This process shapes foreign public

perception (Tasci, 2011, p. 116), influencing perceptions of a country's importance (country salience), as well as perceptions of the importance of certain characteristics possessed by that country (attributes salience) (Wanta, 2019, p. 230). According to Urry and Larsen (2011), tourists have a systematic 'gaze' formed by a combination of experience, television, magazines, literature, cinema, and photography, and this gaze is the resulting image of the impression they have of a place. Tourist gaze plays an important role in the power relations of cultural tourism, as it makes people prepare shows to present their traditions in front of tourists, sometimes losing their meaning or even changing aspects of them to suit tourists' expectations (Flores and Nava, 2016, p. 13). As a result, this has an impact on the tourism industry within said country or destination.

The relevance of PR in the promotion of destinations has changed over time. PR has a high potential in promoting destinations supporting advertising strategies and was, for a long time, an undervalued aspect of destination marketing and destination branding (Morgan and Pritchard, 2008). This is because PR effects in destination marketing are very difficult to measure. In the end, it is the public who shapes the country's image. As Sevin (2019, p. 245) points out, the publics are free to accept or reject the messages they receive, and they build their perceptions based on their prior experiences and knowledge. However, the relevance of PR seems to have changed since the Great Recession of the late 2000s. The recession ended with the consumer age, a period from the 1980s to 2007 when consumers' disposable income rose (Cynamon and Fazzari, 2012), and consumers naturally became more cautious about their spending, resulting in many people being unable to afford holidays. Additionally, the growth of social media platforms led to consumer interactions by rating products and leaving reviews to make wiser purchase decisions. As a result, advertisers started using PR as an alternative to engaging with consumers.

2.5 Conclusions

This chapter investigated the theoretical background defining and explaining the main elements that take part in promoting a destination. It presented definitions for marketing, PR, advertising, branding, country identity, country brand, country image, country reputation, nation branding, and destination marketing, establishing their relationship. This chapter examined how places and destinations are branded and how marketing and PR promote them. It discussed how the process influences public opinion and improves the image and reputation of countries and destinations. Additionally, this chapter explored the challenges and opportunities that marketing and PR face in the digital world, describing how strategies and promotional campaigns are

changing to target specific audiences using new formats through social media platforms and new technologies like VR.

This chapter reviewed some of the main theories used in PR. Topić (2017) classified these theories into relationship, social influence, and mass communication theories. Relationship theories analyse how organisations establish relationships with their stakeholders. Social influence theories study how the public is constantly influenced by their peers in their daily interactions. Mass communication theories examine how traditional mass media communicate and frame their content to influence public opinion, whether positively or negatively. There is one thing they have in common: they all look at influence and persuasion.

It can be concluded That although there are no universally accepted definitions for marketing and PR, both work together to persuade and influence public opinion, perceptions, and decisions in a changing and challenging digital landscape. While marketing is more sales-oriented, PR looks after reputation, establishing communication between the stakeholders of an organisation. Branding is the process by which a product is labelled using colours, images, or symbols to create a unique personality to differentiate it from other products. Marketing and PR contribute to destination branding and promoting a country's image by coordinating campaigns and actions. Even though advertising has a long tradition of promoting tourist destinations, PR can significantly impact consumers at a lower cost. Branding a destination or a country differs from branding other products because a destination comprises different products and services (e.g. hotels, restaurants, tours). Marketing strategies, therefore, attempt to brand destinations based on the common good values they represent.

The concepts of country identity, brand, image, and reputation differ in how they are constructed. While country identity and brand are constructed as self-perceptions and self-representations of a country's inhabitants, country image and reputation are constructed as the representation and interpretation of foreign publics about a country. Therefore, it can be concluded that the quality of a country's image is not just affected by campaigns but is also determined by factors such as media representations, geographical location, peers' influence, and the public's previous experiences.

In order to measure country image more accurately, Buhmann (2016) proposed a 4-dimensional model of country image that incorporates an aesthetic dimension that is particularly relevant to this study. His aesthetic dimension comprises four elements: Cultural goods, Culinary, History and traditions, and Landscapes and scenery. This study utilises that framework to explore potential visitors' visual perceptions of Mexico. However, to have a more specific perspective of the visual representations they associate with Mexico, this study subdivided Landscapes and scenery into Rural landscapes and scenery and Urban landscapes and scenery.

Marketing and PR work together to promote and brand destinations through events, advertisements, brochures, and other promotional materials. Advertising and branding are growing in a world where people's needs and values are constantly changing. Technology has segmented publics with similar hobbies, interests, or activities, posing challenges to engaging with them. As a result, promotional strategies are changing, and marketers and PR practitioners are adapting them to reach different market segments. New promotional strategies should always appeal to the targeted, segmented market representing the values that the publics feels identify with. Promotional strategies should also take into consideration lifestyles and other channels of influence. Today, videos that can easily go viral on social media and hashtags that can be positioned in the trending topic lists can reach a higher number of people than traditional advertising. Promotional strategies, therefore, should be adapted and conducted in the context in which they are being developed.

This chapter established a theoretical background with the theories and processes related to branding and promotion of destinations. This theoretical background helps to explore Mexico's country image, branding, image, and reputation. These concepts, theories, and elements aid in exploring the impact 360-degree video can have on the promotion of Mexico's Magical Towns. The next chapter provides a background on 360-degree video and its applications in tourism.

Chapter 3. Conceptualising Virtual Reality

3.1 Introduction

The previous chapter provided background knowledge of the concepts and theories related to the promotion of destinations. It defined marketing and PR, establishing the differences between the two and explaining how they work together to promote destinations. The previous chapter also presented a series of classic PR and communication theories that give the basis for the practice and study of said discipline. Finally, it explained the theoretical elements that play a role in the construction of country identity, brand, image, and reputation. The previous chapter helped establish a theoretical background for this study before moving forward to explaining the concepts related to technology and VR.

The definition of VR is strongly related to its conception and evolution. What is known as VR today is the result of combining different technologies and concepts that followed different evolutionary paths (Neelakantam and Pant, 2017). From the early Victorian stereoscopes to the idealisation of VR in science fiction, depictions of fictional futuristic VR HMDs in popular culture, and the recent integration of VR capabilities on smartphones, ‘people have long been captivated by the promise of a portable world’ (Sokohl, 2017, p. 6). As a technological concept, VR attempts to create an immersive simulation where the user can feel transported to a different place or environment. That environment could be either a replica of a real place or an artificial computer-generated one. VR technology is very versatile, and it brings different advantages and uses in many disciplines and areas, such as medicine, the military, and the entertainment and video game industry, being the latter where VR found a significant opportunity for development. Thus, it is important to briefly review the evolution of this technology and some of the significant developments in the field to better understand its core concept and clarify the terminology used throughout this thesis.

This chapter provides that background to help understand the concepts and terminology related to VR and its applications in tourism. The history of VR is presented in a timeline outlining the evolution of this technology, defining and highlighting its main characteristics. This chapter also explores the relationship between technology and tourism and the applications of VR in tourism. It critically reviews some of the literature in the field and identifies the main contributions and gaps. This chapter is essential for exploring the potential of 360-degree videos in promoting the Magical Towns as international tourist destinations.

This chapter is divided into four sections. Firstly, it explains the major innovations that contributed to current types of VR chronologically. Secondly, it explores the different concepts for

these terms and establishes meaning boundaries that help clarify the way they are used in this thesis. Thirdly, it explores the relationship between the three, the influence of technology in tourism, and the application of VR in the promotion of destinations. Finally, it explains the research field of eTourism and critically reviews previous research in the field that addresses VR in tourism, identifying its key findings, limitations, and the gaps that this study attempts to fill.

3.2 History and evolution of VR

To understand the core concept of VR and establish the definition used throughout this thesis, it is necessary first to understand its origin and evolution. Like most emerging technologies, VR has followed an evolutionary path in which expectations and visibility have varied through time. This evolutionary path could be graphically represented in a Gartner's Hype Cycle (see Figure 3.1) that pinpoints the different phases of its development through time. This section explores the history of VR, presenting some of the main innovations that shaped its evolution.

The Gartner Hype Cycle is a graphic representation of the maturity and adoption path of emerging technologies (Gartner-Inc., n.d.). It was created in 1995 by Gartner Inc. by merging two equations or curves, and it allegedly depicts a common pattern that most technological innovations follow in terms of expectations over time (Steinert and Leifer, 2010, p. 2). Its central argument is that 'people have been swept up with the possibility and then disappointed with the initial reality of the next new thing for centuries' (Fenn and Raskino, 2008, p. 10). The Gartner Hype Cycle is widely used in the technology industry to justify investment decisions, influencing the current trends (Steinert and Leifer, 2010).

This model is considered a management decision tool and is very influential in the technology industry, business, and online media but disregarded in academia. The Hype Cycle is defined as a structured qualitative analytical tool. Its decisions are based on different data sets, such as surveys, media texts, forecasts, and predictions (Fenn and Bloesch, 2018). For this reason, the model has received criticism from detractors who consider that it lacks objectivity and is not scientific. For instance, Steinert and Leifer (2010) say that Gartner's Hype Cycle has not been scrutinised enough regarding its theoretical foundations, methodological procedures, and empirical validity. After rigorous scrutiny, they recommend that Gartner Inc. should improve its methodology with a more substantial mathematical model. However, the Hype Cycle is not a quantitative chart and is not intended to be flawless. Their graphic conclusions are the result of combining evidence based on data and human judgement.

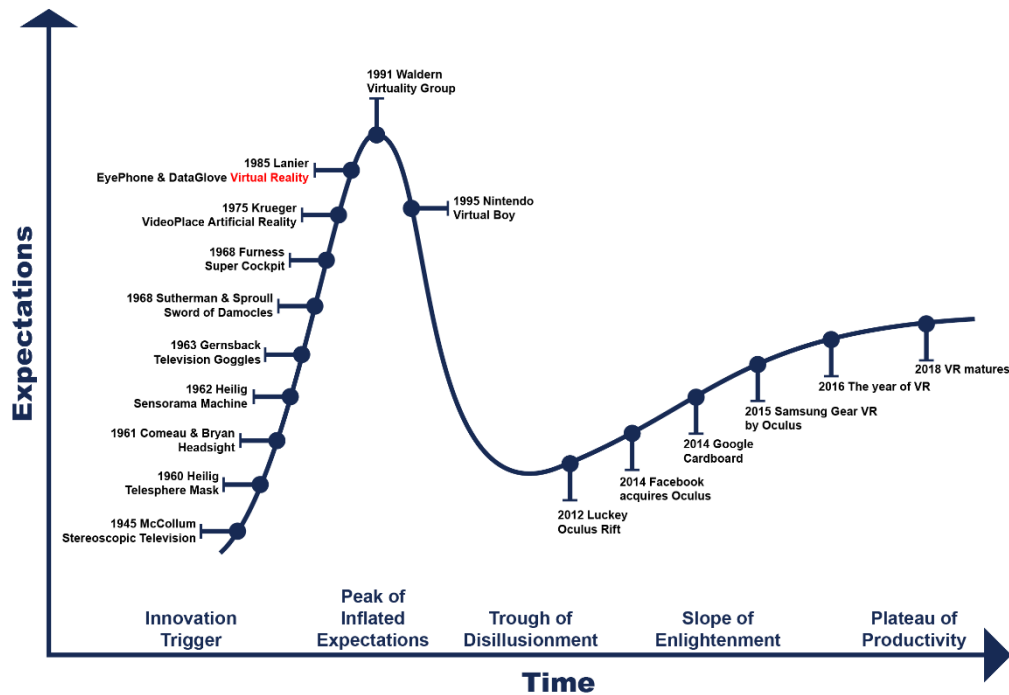


Figure 3.1. Timeline of the evolution of VR represented on a Gartner's Hype Cycle.

Figure 3.1 shows the evolution of VR represented on a Gartner's Hype Cycle chart. The cycle consists of five phases. First, there is an Innovation Trigger, then the innovation reaches a Peak of Inflated Expectations, it abruptly drops into a Trough of Disillusionment, but it eventually recovers in a Slope of Enlightenment and reaches a Plateau of Productivity (Fenn and Raskino, 2008). The Gartner Hype Cycle is being used to graphically represent the evolution of VR as a timeline because it is common and familiar in the technology circles as a reference to the current state of emerging technologies. Figure 3.1 is only intended to represent a timeline graphically. It is not intended to validate Gartner's Hype Cycle methodology nor attempts to test it. Figure 3.1 is not constructed with Gartner Inc. data; it is only an initial proposed representation of the evolution of VR solely based on an intuitive interpretation of the phenomenon and is used as a narrative structure. This section presents and explains the main innovations in each phase of the proposed hype cycle. Looking at the evolution of VR in each phase helps to have more clarity on its current position.

3.2.1 Innovation trigger

The earliest ancestor of VR HMDs are the rudimentary Victorian stereoscopes. These devices were created to see 3D photographs by placing a small photograph in each eye (see Figure 3.2). Both miniatures were photographs taken from slightly different angles of the same site, creating a 3D effect when seen together. Throughout decades, they came in different sizes, colours,

materials, and shapes. In 1939, the View-Master (see Figure 3.3) was presented at the New York World's Fair, and it soon became one of the most popular stereoscopes (Sell *et al.*, 2000). The View-Master offered an early kind of virtual tourism for the first time. Users could insert photo reels in the device with photographs of the main tourist attractions of cities around the world. It was intended to be a revolutionary type of modern postcard or souvenir, but it eventually became a popular toy for children. This stereoscopic principle is the foundation of modern HMDs.



Figure 3.2. Photograph of a Holmes stereoscope, popular in the 19th century (by Davepape 2006, PD).



Figure 3.3. Photograph of a Sawyer's View-Master Model A (by Kobbaka 2016, CC-BY-SA 4.0)

Some of the earliest HMDs were developed attempting to provide an individual television experience. The oldest record of a personal television device is a patent from 1945 by Thelma McCollum (see Figure 3.4). It describes a device designed for passively watching films in a stereoscopic mode without any capabilities for interaction. However, the device never saw the light of day (Steinicke, 2016, p. 25). In 1960 Morton Heilig patented the Telesphere Mask (see Figure 3.5), which was also intended for displaying films as a stereoscopic personal television. He also developed a more sensorial and immersive device in 1962, the Sensorama Machine (see Figure 3.6). This machine was a box that allowed the viewer to have a more immersive and sensorial experience by using elements like a vibrating seat, wind, and aromas (Steinicke, 2016, pp. 26-27). In 1963, Hugo Gernsback developed a prototype of a similar device to McCollum's, known as the television goggles (see Figure 3.7). All these inventions had a clear entertainment motivation, and although they were not very successful, they triggered the research and development that led to current technologies. The Sensorama Machine, for instance, served as the basis for modern-day 4D cinema rooms that bring multisensory experiences.

Other HMD evolved in parallel, focusing on motion tracking to provide a sense of presence. In 1961 Charles Comeau and James Bryan developed the Headsight, which was built on a helmet with a motion tracker that allowed the user to move a video camera lens remotely (see

Figure 3.8). The device was developed for military use in the exploration of dangerous places (Comeau and Bryan, 1961). In 1968, Ivan Sutherland and Bob Sproull developed an HMD which they called Sword of Damocles (see Figure 3.9). This HMD allowed the user to place virtual wireframe 3D geometrical models on a real-world view (Sutherland, 1965; Sutherland, 1968). This device was one of the earliest HMDs and a precursor of current Augmented Reality (AR), an emerging technology that places virtual objects over the real world. Likewise, Thomas A. Furness III started designing another HMD. It was used at the Wright Patterson US Air Force Base for several decades as a flight simulator for pilots' training and was eventually known as the super cockpit (Furness, 1986; Delaney, 2014; Steinicke, 2016). The sense of presence provided by these devices opened the door to the idea of a whole alternative reality.

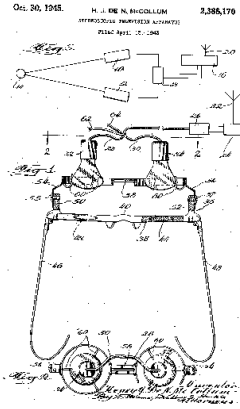


Figure 3.4. McCollum's Stereoscopic Television Apparatus (Patent US2388170).

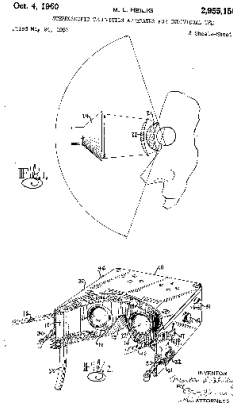


Figure 3.5. Heilig's Telesphere Mask (Patent US2955156).



Figure 3.6. Heilig's Sensorama Machine (USC Hugh M. Hefner Figure Moving Image Archive).



Figure 3.7. Photograph of Hugo Gernsback wearing his Television Goggles (by Alfred Eisenstaedt. The Life Picture Collection).

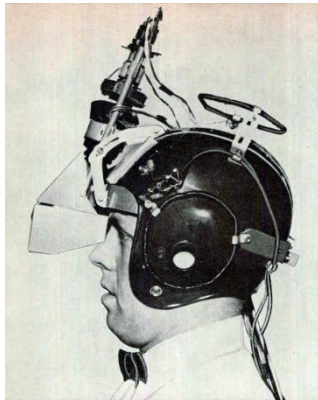


Figure 3.8. Photograph of the Headsight HMD (extracted from Comeau and Bryan, 1961, p. 87).

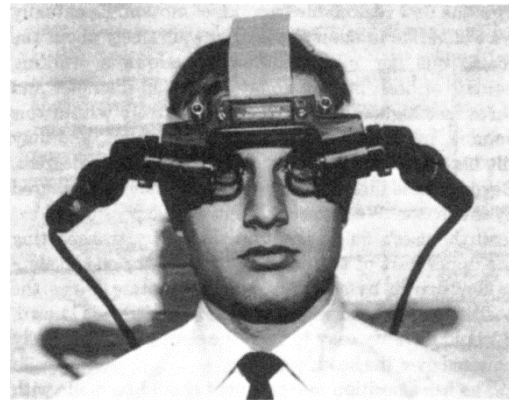


Figure 3.9. Photograph of the Sword of Damocles HMD (extracted from Sutherland, 1968, p. 759).

During the 1970s and 1980s, Myron Krueger developed experimental platforms for the interaction between humans and computers. He experimented with using a computer, a video camera, a projector, and a wall, developing different interactive experiences and coining the early term Artificial Reality (see Krueger, 1983; Krueger, 1985; Krueger *et al.*, 1985; Krueger, 1991). His VideoPlace experience gained popularity in 1975 and consisted of a full-body human-computer interaction in which a person could manipulate virtual elements projected on the wall by capturing the body's motion with a camera (see Figure 3.10) (Krueger, 1985; Krueger *et al.*, 1985; Steinicke, 2016, pp. 28-29). Although his innovations did not include HMDs, they significantly contributed to developing interactive technologies. They provided the basis for ideas used in popular gaming devices in the 2010s, such as Microsoft's Xbox Kinect and Sony's PlayStation Move. Those two video game devices substituted the classic controller with the player's body using motion sensors. Although the popularity of said games declined and some were discontinued, the same sensors and infrared technology are currently used in other innovations like Mixed Reality (MR), a type of technology that integrates both VR and AR.



Figure 3.10. Photograph of Krueger's VideoPlace in action (extracted from Krueger, 1985, p. 145).

3.2.2 Peak of inflated expectations and trough of disillusionment

The term Virtual Reality did not appear until the mid-1980s. Many of the aforementioned devices were developed before the invention of the personal computer, they were not even called VR at all, and the accessibility for the average technology consumer was limited. The term Virtual Reality per se was coined by Jaron Lanier, who founded his company Visual Programming Lab (VPL) in 1985. They were the first company that developed and commercialised an HMD through the late 1980s. They called it the EyePhone, and it was complemented with a special glove that allowed a degree of interaction, known as the DataGlove (see Figure 3.11) (Delaney, 2014; Steinicke, 2016, p. 29). These innovations represented enormous progress in VR and made it reach the Peak of Inflated Expectations in subsequent years due to the growing media coverage around the novelty of VR and the technological advancements that made it possible.

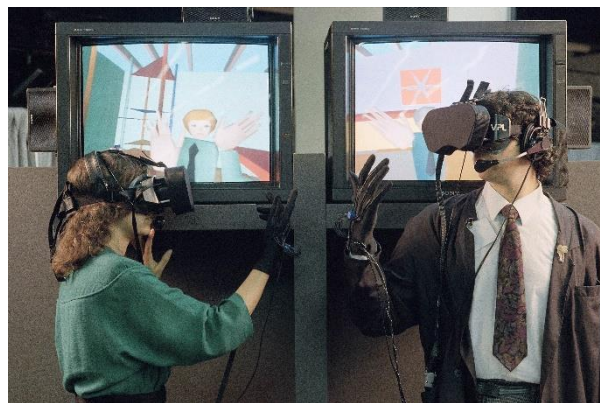


Figure 3.11. Photograph of two people demonstrating the EyePhone system (by AP Photo/Jeff Reinking, 7 June 1989).

In the early 1990s, most VR efforts were concentrated in the video game industry. In 1991, W Industries, a British company founded by Jonathan Waldern, later renamed Virtuality Group, launched the first publicly accessible VR experience in small arcade theme parks (see Figure 3.12) (Delaney, 2014). However, VR soon started to fall into the Trough of Disillusionment as the expectations for VR were very high, and technology in the 1990s was not able to meet them, disappointing the average users as they were only able to see basic figures in meagre resolution (Steinicke, 2016, p. 7). Nevertheless, Nintendo tried commercialising a portable individual HMD in 1995, the *Virtual Boy*. This device, however, was no more than a monochromatic 3D stereoscopic video game within an HMD mounted on a tripod. There was no motion tracking, and it was played with a manual controller (see Figure 3.12). Despite having an enormous advertising campaign and the intention of bringing a VR-like experience to all homes, Nintendo quietly left it to die without any formal announcement due to the lack of sales (Boyer, 2009). VR then faded, and people forgot about it for a while.



Figure 3.12. Photographs of VR used for gaming in the 1990s.
 a) & b) Virtuality Group arcades (by Virtuality Group n.d.).
 c) Nintendo's Virtual Boy (by Evan-Amos 2011, CC-BY-SA 3.0).

3.2.3 Slope of enlightenment

In the late 2000s and early 2010s, the birth and rise of the Web 2.0 and the invention of smartphones changed the world forever, making VR enter the Slope of Enlightenment phase. The Web 2.0, allowed new ways of social interaction online, including the proliferation of social media platforms like Facebook, petition websites like Change.org, and crowdfunding platforms like Kickstarter, which materialised all sorts of projects. Motivated by the frustrating lack of technologies that could provide a decent long-promised VR, Palmer Luckey founded Oculus VR and started a Kickstarter crowdfunding campaign in 2012, bringing his Rift HMD (see Figure 3.13) to the developers' market (Oculus, 2012). In 2014, Facebook acquired Oculus (Facebook, 2014), causing a boom in the commercialisation of HMDs, smartphone apps, and 360-degree video cameras for the following years. This situation reawakened the interest in VR, with other tech companies developing similar devices to compete.

The portability of smartphones and their new technological capabilities permitted having portable VR. Most smartphones incorporate sensors such as magnetometers, accelerometers and gyroscopes that enable immersive experiences when playing 360-degree videos in stereoscopic mode, allowing a degree of free movement on its axis. Those mobile phone

characteristics led to simpler HMDs that require a smartphone to work (see Figure 3.14). In that case, the HMD serves as a supporting structure only, while the mobile phone does all the work. In 2014, Google launched their DIY version called Google Cardboard. This HMD, as its name implies, was made of cardboard, and users could either purchase it from their website for less than £20 or construct it at home following the free, open-source guides (see Figure 3.15). The ease of access to this technology increased the interest in mobile VR, encouraging developers to create more mobile apps (Neelakantam and Pant, 2017, p. 11), allowing users to experience and own VR for a small fraction of the price of professional HMDs, and ultimately starting the age of democratisation of VR.



Figure 3.13. Photograph of an Oculus Rift DK1 (by Sebastian Stabinger 2013, CC BY 3.0).

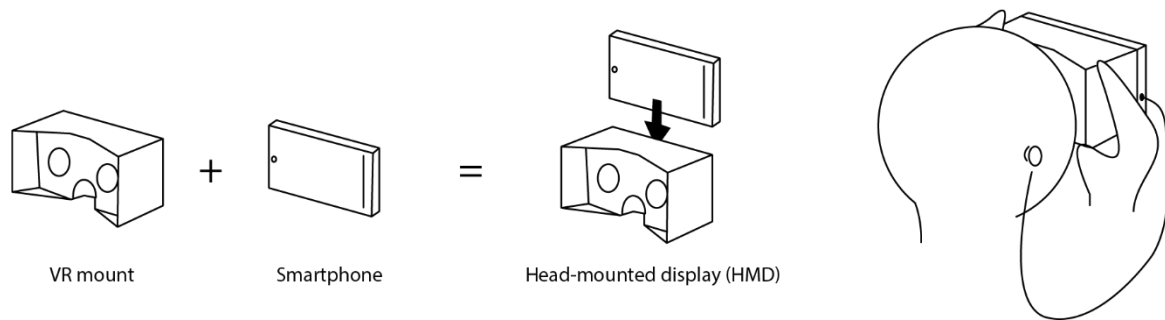


Figure 3.14. Mobile-based VR setup (extracted from Neelakantam and Pant, 2017, p. 2).



Figure 3.15. Photographs of the Google Cardboard template and a Google Cardboard assembled (by Google 2014).

3.2.4 Plateau of productivity

The regained expectations increased research and development, helping VR to mature. The expectation encouraged a proliferation of VR HMDs in gaming, such as the PlayStation VR, Oculus Rift CV1, and the HTC Vive. This increased interest and expectation led the media to consider 2016 ‘the year of VR’ (Hern, 2015; Cellan-Jones, 2016; Steinicke, 2016), as that year also saw an increase in VR content such as games, apps, and 360-degree videos. After realising the new possibilities and the potential of VR in solving problems in fields like medicine, education, psychology, military, and aerospace research, VR found itself in the Plateau of Productivity.

In 2018, VR technology disappeared from the annual Gartner Hype Cycle. The consultancy stopped including VR in their chart of emerging technologies as they considered it a matured technology. That meant that due to its high development, commercialisation, and penetration in the market, VR no longer has a place in Gartner’s chart as it is no longer emerging. This regained interest also permeated popular culture again, where films like Ready Player One (a 2018 adaptation of a 2011 science fiction novel) were released. The expectations and media coverage decreased with the maturity of VR.

3.2.5 Double hype cycle

The resurgence of VR and its sudden wane from the media suggests that it experienced a double-hype cycle. As Fenn and Bloesch (2018) explain, a Hype Cycle can experience an uncommon second Peak of Inflated Expectations during the Slope of Enlightenment. When this happens, the second peak tends to be softer and less dramatic because it is driven by real progress and understanding (Fenn and Raskino, 2008, pp. 80-81). Reasons for a second peak include new product versions, suppliers' activity, or mere marketing. For VR, it could be argued that a second peak happened for those three reasons (see Figure 3.16). Not only did Oculus catch the public's attention on Kickstarter, but Facebook's acquisition increased expectations. In other words, a well-known investor was taking and launching new versions of the product with a marketing campaign. Additionally, a mini peak in 2016 could have resulted from the proliferation of gaming HMDs (see Figure 3.17) and the media calling it 'The Year of VR'. It soon fell into a mini Trough of Disillusionment when media coverage decreased, and it finally reached the Plateau of Productivity when Gartner erased it from their list of emerging technologies.

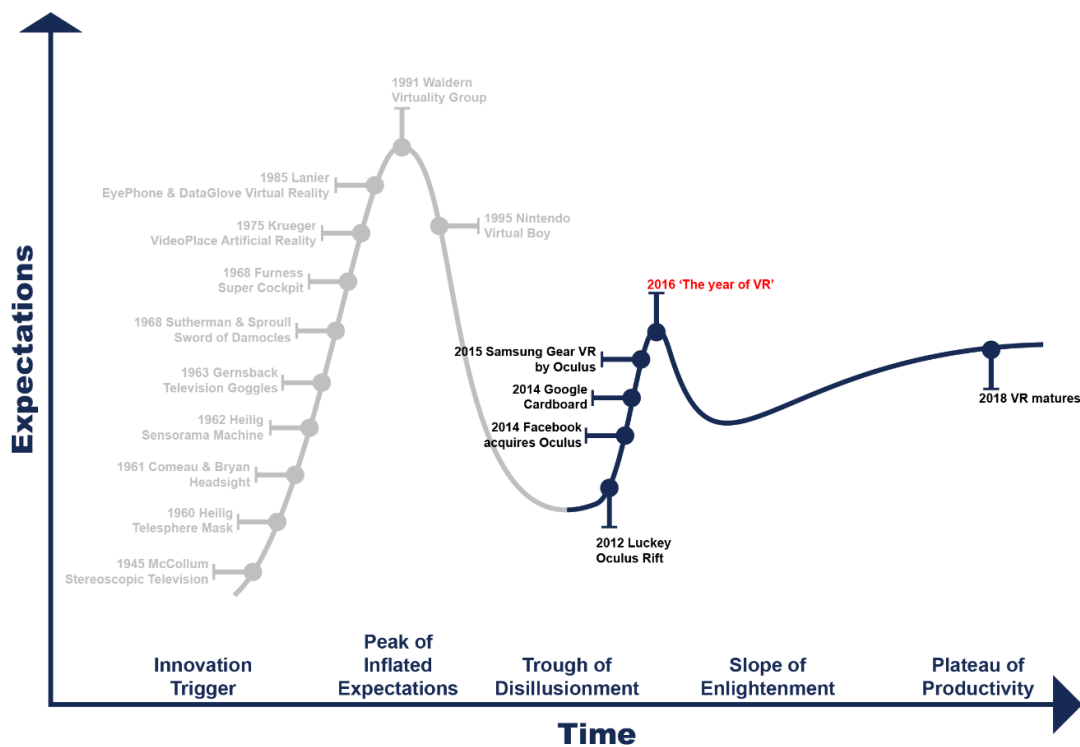


Figure 3.16. Argued timeline of VR's evolution represented on a Gartner's Double-Hype Cycle.



Figure 3.17. Photographs of three of the most popular VR HMDs in 2016.
 a) Oculus Rift CV1 (by Evan-Amos 2017, PD).
 b) PlayStation VR (by Evan-Amos 2017, PD).
 c) HTC Vive (by HTC 2016)

For Steinicke (2016, p. 15), the difference between VR adoption in the 1990s and today lies in the social context. Firstly, the technical situation of the 1990s did not allow for fully immersive experiences, as opposed to the technological capabilities available today. Secondly, the market is different. Many major companies, like Google, Facebook, HTC, and Samsung, have invested enormous amounts of money in research and innovation, competing with new products. Finally, accessibility and consumer culture. The transition from purely mechanical and electronic to digital technology brought a digital revolution that allowed the fast development of computers and smartphones. This revolution, however, is not only characterised by changes in production but in the ways of consumption. Just as the industrial revolution started the industrial age, Castells (2009; 2010a; 2010b) states that the Digital Revolution and the constant growth of the Internet triggered the Information Age. In the Information Age, there is an Information Society (Skogerbø and Syvertsen, 2004) that commonly interacts on social media, communicates through email and smartphones, and frequently pays with PayPal, electronic bank transfers and cryptocurrencies like Bitcoin. These changes facilitated the adoption and popularity of current types of VR.

3.3 Concepts of VR and 360-degree video

The name Virtual Reality has been around since the mid-1980s, but not everyone agreed with it initially. Negroponte (1995, p. 116) stated that it is called VR because it attempts to make ‘the artificial as realistic as (...) the real’; therefore, VR is a virtual version of reality. However, the term seems contradictory as the words Virtual and Reality have opposite connotations. Crowe (1995) disagreed with using the word Reality in the name and proposed the term Virtual Realism as a more appropriate one. The term Virtual Realism was never widely adopted by the mainstream of the VR community, and Virtual Reality stayed under different conceptualisations.

Most VR definitions share some common characteristics. Cruz-Neira *et al.* (1992) identified three main elements that take part in a complete VR experience. These are visualisation (the ability to look around), immersion (the sense of physically being in another place), and interactivity (the degree of control over the virtual environment). Similarly, Burdea and Coiffet (2003) mentioned that VR involves three characteristics, substituting visualisation for imagination and keeping immersion and interactivity. Despite both definitions being written decades ago, current types of VR still meet those characteristics. More recent definitions include the one proposed by Delaney (2014, p. 33), who states that VR is an experience that must be mediated by a computer, constructed with 3D objects, and that offers the possibility of free interactivity. However, Frederick Brooks (cited in Steinicke, 2016, pp. viii-ix) keeps a more conservative and technical definition based on the traditional three characteristics from previous definitions. According to him, VR displays a real-time image that changes depending on the direction the head is pointing to, it provides a virtual environment that replaces reality, and the ability of interacting with the virtual environment manipulating the objects within it. Thus, the key element in VR is immersion.

Immersion is what makes VR different from other technologies. By definition, VR occurs in an interactive computer-generated Virtual Environment where the user can navigate having a real-time simulation (Burdea and Coiffet, 2003; Gutiérrez A *et al.*, 2008; Guttentag, 2010). Following that logic, it could be argued that in a personal computer, the user visualises and navigates a Virtual Environment interacting with virtual representations of everyday office objects such as a desktop, folders, and files. The lack of immersion is why a personal computer is not a VR experience. Immersion is about bringing a sense of presence, spatial presence or telepresence, which is the feeling of projecting the human mind to another place (Slater and Usoh, 1993; Wirth *et al.*, 2007; Slater, 2009). VR uses different resources, such as motion tracking that allows a 360-degree view, giving the sensation of being embodied in another place (Steinicke, 2016; Tussyadiah *et al.*, 2017), something that a personal computer does not provide. There are, however, instances where the Virtual Environment in VR is captured and extracted from the real world and not computer-generated. That is the case of 360-degree videos, which provide a feeling of being transported to another real place.

The 360-degree video format has its roots in panoramic views. The use of 360-degree panoramas began in art more than two hundred years ago, when painter Robert Barker displayed a mural painting of the city of Edinburgh in a circular room in London. For the first time, people had a 360-degree experience and the feeling of being in a different place (Dorta, 2004, p. 4). However, modern panoramic displays started in the 1990s, when Apple firstly developed a panoramic viewing format with their software QuickTime VR (QTVR). This software was

developed to create and view 360-degree photographs, a format that allows moving around a still photograph in 360 degrees using the computer's mouse. From there, other software like Spin Panorama, VR Worx, Ulead and iMove were developed for the same purpose (Othman *et al.*, 2002, p. 364). Today, 360-degree photographs are still used on platforms like Google Maps, where its Street View feature allows exploring the streets of almost any city, and many hotel websites offer panoramic views of their bedrooms. The capturing method consists of several cameras pointing in different directions simultaneously and stitching the resulting images into one. This idea was later applied to video.

There are different platforms on which modern 360-degree video can be viewed. These are computers (using the mouse to move around), mobile devices like smartphones or tablets (using the fingers on the touchscreen or moving the device around), and HMDs (using the head and body movements to look around) (Neumann *et al.*, 2000; Hernández *et al.*, 2001; Fraustino *et al.*, 2018). Today, the integration and support of this format on several online platforms encourage the uploading and sharing of user-generated content. Facebook and YouTube, for instance, allow uploading and sharing 360-degree videos that can be played on any of the aforementioned devices. This feature gives 360-degree video the versatility and freedom of being played on the user's preferred platform and device. When the chosen device happens to be an HMD, 360-degree video provides what could be considered a type of VR.

However, there has been debate on whether 360-degree video should be considered VR. It could be argued that the difference between 360-degree video and VR lies in the fact that VR has a stronger level of immersion as it provides a fully interactive experience in a navigable three-dimensional set that is often a synthetic Virtual Environment. In contrast, 360-degree video captures and presents a spherical or panoramic view of a real place without much depth of field. It is true that 360-degree video offers a lesser level of interaction with virtual objects, making tasks like walking in the Virtual Environment, manipulating a virtual tool, or opening a virtual door nearly impossible. However, with today's technology, 360-degree video has increased its capacity for providing a higher degree of interaction, incorporating buttons and arrows that can link other 360-degree videos creating the illusion of having a bigger Virtual Environment to walk through when moving from one 360-video to the other. These improvements have contributed to blurring the line between 360-degree video and more sophisticated types of VR. Therefore, a 360-degree video played on an HMD provides an experience that could be considered a type of VR.

Despite the discussion, mainstream technology companies have marketed and commercialised 360-degree video as VR. This name could have been given for several reasons, including the fact that 360-degree video is the easiest and cheapest format for having an immersive

experience when using an HMD, and the name VR is more appealing to customers as it is less technical. It is also the most accessible format for user-generated content. Any person with a 360-degree camera can share videos in this format that other users can see with their own HMDs. In this thesis, the 360-degree video format played on HMDs is assumed to be a type of VR because it fulfils the characteristics previously mentioned; when played on HMDs, it is visualised with head motion tracking, bringing a degree of immersion, and it could have interactive elements. To avoid any confusion and be more specific, this thesis uses the term VR to refer to the general technology linked to HMDs, and the term 360-degree video to refer to the specific video format that can be played on HMDs.

3.4 Technology, tourism and VR

Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) have dramatically transformed the tourism industry. They have had repercussions in areas of business, strategies, and structures (Buhalis and Law, 2008; Racherla *et al.*, 2008), influencing every aspect and every stakeholder in the industry, including the tourists themselves (Xiang, 2018; Benckendorff *et al.*, 2019; Gretzel *et al.*, 2020). Above all, it has changed how tourists seek and share information. As media shifted from the traditional one-way mass communication to more individual, segmented and interactive communication, their behaviour had changed towards the new possibilities that media offers, in which the audiences become more participants (Livingstone, 1999; Cho *et al.*, 2002).

In the Information Age, the new tourists have access to a much more significant source of information that has empowered them, making them more knowledgeable about the destinations they are interested in (Buhalis and Law, 2008). Today, tourists can express their opinions about destinations, hotels, airlines, restaurants, and tours, through YouTube videos and reviews on platforms like TripAdvisor, where other users can see, read, and leave their comments as well (Leung *et al.*, 2013; King *et al.*, 2014). The influence of that user-generated content on the decision-making process of potential tourists has been so significant that today, it plays an essential role in the success of every destination (Lim *et al.*, 2012; Camprubí *et al.*, 2013; Narangajavana *et al.*, 2017; Koufodontis and Gaki, 2019). Tourism marketers and PR practitioners are increasingly using new technologies to promote tourist destinations (Cho *et al.*, 2002). That has been mainly done by improving the interaction and communication between the industry and the consumers (Buhalis and Law, 2008) through visual tools like Instagram and YouTube, where they can share photographs and eye-catching videos.

In recent years, accessible types of VR have provided new possibilities for marketing communications, PR, and the tourism industry. This technology became increasingly popular after Facebook acquired the Oculus Company in 2014 (see section 3.2). Since then, other companies such as Samsung, Google, Sony, HTC, and Microsoft started commercialising affordable VR products to the mass market, moving from the ‘early adoption phase’ of VR to the mainstream consumer market (Yung and Khoo-Lattimore, 2017, pp. 1-2). With more people owning HMDs, marketers and PR practitioners have gotten new ways to provide information and interact with consumers and stakeholders in the tourism industry.

The role of VR in the tourism industry is found in different areas performing different tasks. Early studies about the implementation of VR in tourism include the work of Williams and Hobson (1995), who identified three main areas in which VR can be used in tourism. These are the creation of virtual theme parks, VR as a promotional tool, and the creation of artificial tourism. They acknowledged that using VR to promote destinations could be expensive for travel agents and marketers unfamiliar with such innovation. However, as this technology has become more affordable, this does not represent a problem anymore. More recently, Guttentag (2010) identified six areas where VR can be implemented in tourism. These are planning and management, marketing, entertainment, education, accessibility, and heritage preservation, highlighting the revolutionary potential of VR in the promotion of destinations and the virtual visitation to places in danger. Moreover, Tseng *et al.* (2015) proposed the application of VR as an educational tool for training tour guides. Although VR has many applications, the promotion of destinations is consistently mentioned as one of the most promising uses of VR in tourism.

VR is used in the promotion of destinations to raise awareness and improve the destination’s image by providing unique experiences that influence tourists’ decisions and judgements. Although the best way a person can form a mental image of a destination is by visiting the actual place and experiencing it (Gartner, 1993), material that delivers visual experiences, such as photographs and videos, has been long considered a strong way to successfully communicate the image of a destination (MacKay, 1995). Virtual environments and simulations can enhance the experience provided by photographs and traditional videos by giving a sense of presence (Cho *et al.*, 2002, p. 2). That is a crucial feature of VR in promoting destinations as the products are places, and consumers cannot test them in advance (Guttentag, 2010, p. 641). VR enables potential consumers to compare different destinations and make informed decisions more effectively than traditional brochures, thanks to its interactivity and vividness (Williams and Hobson, 1995; Yung and Khoo-Lattimore, 2017). In other words, experiencing a destination with an HMD gives a ‘try it before you buy it’ experience (Tussyadiah *et al.*, 2017, p. 230).

In practice, the best type of VR to promote a destination is 360-degree video (often referred to as Panorama VR and Panoramic Video). Unlike conventional VR, 360-degree video uses footage of real scenes rather than a computer-simulated environment. This feature makes 360-degree video more affordable and easier to produce since many inexpensive 360-degree cameras are available on the market. This video format can be played on different devices, such as computers, smartphones, tablets, or HMDs, and the control method can vary according to the device (a computer mouse, a joystick, the fingers or the head movements) (see section 3.3). Othman *et al.* (2002) concluded that visual content in passive 360 degrees, such as 360-degree photographs (Panorama VR), is a very effective form of communication. They suggested using it on applications that do not require much interaction, such as promotion, advertising, exhibitions, virtual museums, or virtual tours. The same could be said for 360-degree video; the only difference between the two is that 360-degree video is not static. This video format, and its photographic counterpart, can also be used to gain access to places that are usually restricted, such as having a tour inside 10 Downing Street or Buckingham Palace.

Recently, 360-degree content regained popularity during the 2020 Covid-19 pandemic. The British Museum, the Louvre, and many tourist attractions were in lockdown, and they offered free 360-degree tours as an alternative to physical visits. Similarly, the US Electronic System for Travel Authorization (ESTA) website published a list of recommended virtual tours available in different formats, including 360-degree video (ESTA, 2020). The intention was helping to ease the frustration and boredom of avid world travellers during the lockdown. The list of destinations available to visit virtually included Machu Picchu, the Galapagos Islands, the Grand Canyon, and the pyramids of Giza, among others. In Mexico, cultural organisations followed the same trend. For instance, in the town of Tequila, the ‘Juan Beckmann Gallardo’ Cultural Centre offered a similar experience as part of its PR strategies (see Figure 3.18). These virtual cultural experiences were mainly available on their own websites, and users could experience the tours on a computer, a mobile device, or wearing an HMD. Although these tours were mostly photographic, 360-degree video, as mentioned before, follows the same principle. The availability and increasing popularity of 360-degree video and photo is a clear sign of this technology’s increasing maturity and adoption.



Figure 3.18. Screen capture of the 'Juan Beckmann Gallardo' Cultural Centre virtual tour in Tequila, Mexico.

3.5 Researching eTourism

E-Tourism is the research field that studies the union and relationship between technology and tourism. It explores the application of technology in the tourism industry, how technology has influenced changes in the tourism sector, and how those changes have impacted market structures (Buhalis and Law, 2008; Neidhardt and Werthner, 2018). The eTourism field is very dynamic, and it is constantly evolving and requiring continual reorientation as the tourism sector is continuously redefining itself (Egger and Buhalis, 2008). In recent years, eTourism has grown as a research field focusing on technology applied to solve the main problems in the tourism industry and focusing on specific types of technological innovations like Big Data, Web 2.0, and VR (Gretzel *et al.*, 2020, p. 190). Prior to the democratisation of VR, significant contributions started shaping a narrow area of VR in the field of eTourism.

Hernández *et al.* (2001) researched 360-degree videos applied to Virtual Tourism. They developed a rudimentary multi-camera recording system made of 10 cameras filming in different directions simultaneously (the same principle behind modern 360-degree cameras). The resulting footage was a panoramic experience that allowed users to visit nine European Cultural Cities of the year 2000 by taking virtual tours of their most emblematic sites. The experience was available on a device called WindowVR, developed by Virtual Research Inc. Unlike HMDs, WindowVR consisted of a screen hanging from a support structure and two joysticks on either side, allowing users to move around freely. One of their biggest contributions was that they demonstrated that it was possible to use more affordable devices like WindowVR to produce and visualise 360-degree video, as most of the available technology was very expensive, hard

to implement, and had deficient image quality. Today, 360-degree video cameras are much more affordable, and tablets and smartphones can provide similar 360-degree window-like experiences. The team based at the University of A Coruña subsequently developed a multi-user walkable VR experience on HMDs named the *Empty Museum* (see Hernández *et al.*, 2002; 2003; 2004).

Cho *et al.* (2002) explored web-based virtual tours' potential impact and effects on tourism marketing, developing five propositions. First, web-based virtual tours give potential tourists the ability to identify and evaluate the attributes of a destination before travelling. Second, virtual tours save costs and facilitate the search for experiential information. Third, virtual tours help in modifying the tourists' destination image. Fourth, virtual tours make tourists feel more confident about their expectations of a destination, and fifth, they help increase satisfaction with the actual travel experience and provide the feeling of having taken the right decision for their trip. Likewise, they identified that VR-based virtual tours (i.e. using an HMD) had a higher potential for telepresence than web-based tours but a deficient level of accessibility and flexibility. Although these propositions were significant contributions, they were written in a world where potential tourists had less information available and fewer opportunities to share opinions. Today, both types of virtual tours are more accessible, affordable, and flexible, and tourists are exposed to being influenced by more sources such as social media and platforms like TripAdvisor and Google Maps.

The research that explores VR in tourism falls into a narrow subcategory of eTourism and has limited literature that can be categorised according to their approaches. Some studies explore tourists' attitudes towards VR and destinations (see Tussyadiah *et al.*, 2017; Fang and Lin, 2019; Kim and Hall, 2019; Shen *et al.*, 2020). Other studies explore VR as a marketing tool (see Griffin *et al.*, 2017; Van Kerrebroeck *et al.*, 2017a; Van Kerrebroeck *et al.*, 2017b; Marasco *et al.*, 2018). Some others research the influence of VR on potential tourist decision-making processes (see Cho *et al.*, 2002; Lin *et al.*, 2020). There are also studies that look at the experiences and sense of presence that VR provides to tourists (see Wagler and Hanus, 2018; González-Rodríguez *et al.*, 2020; Shen *et al.*, 2020). However, the identified approaches are not exclusive, as some projects fit into more than one category exploring different aspects of this technology. There is also a generalised lack of heterogeneity in the terminology as they refer to this technology differently, using names such as Panoramic Video, Panorama VR, VR, or 360-degree video. It is, therefore, difficult to establish a standardised classification.

Yung and Khoo-Lattimore (2017) found that marketing and promotion is the most common research context for VR in tourism. This is, perhaps, because the accessibility and growing amount of VR content related to tourism are bringing new opportunities to promote

destinations. Marketers and PR practitioners use media and technology to deliver information to potential tourists to persuade them to visit a destination (Huang *et al.*, 2016). With VR facilitating virtual visitations to real destinations (Tussyadiah *et al.*, 2017), it is a natural opportunity for practitioners and researchers to try to understand how VR could influence the travel decision-making process and enhance the promotion of destinations. This topic has been discussed even before the boom of current VR platforms (see Cheong, 1995; Williams and Hobson, 1995; Dewailly, 1999; Guttentag, 2010; Huang *et al.*, 2016), and it has been growing and evolving along with VR innovations.

Tussyadiah *et al.* (2017) aimed to understand how VR experiences and spatial presence (sense of being there) might influence travel decision-making and attitudes towards destinations. Their 202-participant study consisted of two parts. The first part was a VR experience using 360-degree videos and photographs. Some participants were asked to download the Google Cardboard app on their iPhones and use the Google Cardboard viewer to visit Tokyo, Japan, virtually. Other participants were requested to use Samsung Gear VR with a Samsung smartphone to visit Porto, Portugal. For the second part, participants were required to fill out an online questionnaire, and the resulting data were analysed using factor analysis and analysis of variance. The study used existing VR applications and personal VR devices on a sample of undergraduate and graduate students.

Tussyadiah *et al.* (2017) had three findings relevant to this thesis. First, they concluded that in order to achieve higher spatial presence, VR experiences should reduce distractions such as disappearing objects, virtual buttons or other elements that could break with the realistic experience. Second, that spatial presence positively contributes to changing attitudes towards destinations. The higher the sense of presence, the stronger the interest. This finding suggests that VR has good potential in promoting destinations through marketing and PR. Third, they found no statistically significant differences in using different VR devices. Using low-cost VR devices like Google Cardboard brought comparable responses and similar experiences to more sophisticated HMDs. Their study, however, had some limitations. The sample was limited to young students with a majority of female participants, the data was limited to their responses in the questionnaires, they only tested mobile-based HMDs, and they had an unbalanced number of Google Cardboard against Samsung Gear VR devices.

Griffin *et al.* (2017) conducted an experimental study testing three formats of promotional tools. With a sample of 121 undergraduate students, they tested a 360-degree video on an Oculus Rift VR HMD, a two-dimensional (traditional) video on a laptop, and an offline, fully functioning website to explore South Africa as a tourist destination. The sample had an equal number of male and female participants, and they were assigned one of the three tools before

completing a survey. The first group experienced a 360-degree video created by the South Africa Tourism Board. The video was similar to the one used in this thesis, and it showed different experiences such as rock climbing, shark-diving, elephant feeding, and paragliding, with a ‘now experience the real thing, come to South Africa’ call to action at the end. This video was also adapted to a two-dimensional (traditional) video format for the second group. For the third group, they compiled a website with official information.

The quantitative results of Griffin *et al.* (2017) showed three conclusions that are relevant to this thesis. First, VR caused positive emotions and attitudes towards the destination. Second, VR is a more engaging promotional tool than others, as it brings a sense of presence. Third, marketers and PR practitioners should consider using VR to promote destinations as long as they include a call to action and incorporate traditional forms of promotion. Interestingly, participants who experienced VR did not express intent to visit the destination in the next five years, but they were more likely to do further research about the destination. However, such a marginal intent to visit could have resulted from having a sample of undergraduate students who perhaps could not afford long-haul trips in the near future. Changing the participants’ demographics and the promoted destination could have thrown different results.

Similarly, Wagler and Hanus (2018) assessed the realism of 360-degree video in tourism. In their study, participants experienced a 5-minute audio tour of a state capitol building followed by an online survey. Each participant was randomly assigned one of three forms of taking the tour: a two-dimensional (traditional) video on a computer, an immersive 360-degree video on an Oculus Rift HMD, or a physical visit to the building with an audio guide. The formats were measured and compared on four aspects: spatial presence, emotional engagement, tour outreach intentions, and sponsor liking. The results of their analysis of covariance indicated that the participants who experienced the tour on traditional video scored lower in the four aspects compared to participants who experienced it in the other two formats. Surprisingly, participants who had the physical visit had no differences from those who had the 360-degree video experience on a VR HMD. They concluded that 360-degree video/VR could be comparable, if not equivalent, to real-world visits. The filming of their 360-degree video was done in a similar process and conditions to the one of this thesis.

Recent research conducted by Shen *et al.* (2020) measured the impact of an immersive experience under different VR viewing conditions. Divided into two studies, they explored the user’s perceptions of a university campus tour in VR. In Study 1, they conducted individual semi-structured interviews before and after watching a 360-degree video, followed by a brief survey to measure the level of telepresence (feeling of being in another place) that participants experienced when watching the campus tour on an Oculus Rift CV1 HMD. Participants gave

very few negative points related to sickness and mid-high positive points on telepresence. They expressed a desire for more control over the experience, and they identified the potential of this type of experience in tourism. In Study 2, they examined why and how different VR devices could influence telepresence and persuasion effectiveness, with participants experiencing the same tour on one of three devices: a smartphone, a Google Cardboard viewer, and an Oculus Rift DK2 HMD. The three options showed an equal capacity for giving a sense of presence.

Table 3.1 presents a summary of the beforementioned studies listing them by year. The table presents an overview of the studies, their methods, and key findings. It provides a useful visual comparison showing that the four studies followed similar methods and had important findings and conclusions. The findings presented in this list were relevant and helpful when developing the methodology of this study. These studies served as a comprehensive guide of similar studies on the topic and their lessons learned.

Author(s)	Name of the study	Method(s)	Key findings
Tussyadiah <i>et al.</i> (2017)	Virtual Reality and Attitudes Toward Tourism Destinations	VR Experience Scale Questionnaire	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • VR experiences should reduce distractions such as disappearing objects to achieve higher spatial presence. • Spatial presence has a positive contribution to changing attitudes towards destinations. • No statistically significant differences in using different VR devices.
Griffin <i>et al.</i> (2017)	Virtual Reality and Implications for Destination Marketing	VR Experience vs Traditional Video vs Website Scale Questionnaire	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • VR caused positive emotions and attitudes towards the destination. • VR is a more engaging promotional tool than others as it brings a sense of presence. • Marketers and PR practitioners should consider using VR in promoting destinations as long as they follow up with a call to action and traditional forms of promotion.
Wagler and Hanus (2018)	Comparing Virtual Reality Tourism to Real-Life Experience: Effects of Presence and Engagement on Attitude and Enjoyment	VR Experience vs Traditional Video vs Actual Visit Scale Questionnaire	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • VR could be comparable, if not equivalent, to real-world experiences.
Shen <i>et al.</i> (2020)	Using virtual reality to promote the university brand: When do telepresence and system immersion matter?	Individual semi-structured interviews + VR Experience + Scale Questionnaire Different VR Experiences: Smartphone vs Google Cardboard viewer vs Oculus Rift DK2 HMD + Questionnaire	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Very few negative aspects related to sickness and mid-high positive points in telepresence. • Desire for having more control over the experience. • Identified the potential of this type of experience in tourism. • The three formats have equal capacity for giving a sense of presence.

Table 3.1. Similar research with key findings useful for this thesis.

After reviewing some of the literature on the field, five main conclusions were considered when developing this study. First, VR gives a sense of presence similar to visiting a place in real life. Second, elements that could break the realism of a VR experience (such as buttons) should be avoided when producing a VR experience. Third, people tend to have positive attitudes towards VR and destinations presented in 360-degree videos. Fourth, there are no substantial differences between experiences on different VR devices. Fifth, this technology has the potential for promoting destinations as long as a call to action and other forms and marketing and promotion follow it. These conclusions were considered throughout the different stages of this thesis.

There are two characteristics commonly found in most of the literature: the analysis of existing phenomena and the quantitative approach. Most of the research on this topic has focused on commenting on using existing virtual tours and testing existing mobile applications resulting in mainly theoretical contributions. However, this thesis attempts to fill that gap by providing theoretical and practical contributions. This study aims to contribute by explaining the experience and lessons learnt when producing a VR experience that could be replicated and implemented in real-life strategies for destination promotion. Additionally, most of the literature presents studies conducted using quantitative methods to analyse statistical results. Such a quantitative approach limits the amount of data regarding feelings, opinions, motivations, and other conversational expressions that could help get a deeper understanding of the uses and adoption of this technology. Therefore, this thesis uses a qualitative approach to contribute to bringing that human element that cannot be expressed in numbers.

It is important to note that this study was conducted in the context of the 2020 Covid-19 pandemic. Most countries applied travel restrictions, and the tourism industry was severely affected. However, as Gretzel *et al.* (2020) point out, the research field of eTourism was not so affected as people did not stop using technology for tasks related to tourism. Past tourists and potential visitors shared pictures on social media of the places they had visited and the ones they wanted to visit after the lockdown. Airlines used their social media channels, websites, and apps to communicate with customers and arrange changes and cancellations. People enjoyed virtual tours of closed museums and attractions through 360-degree videos, and communication among residents of popular destinations improved through online platforms. All of these situations generated plenty of data for eTourism research (Gretzel *et al.*, 2020, p. 190).

In a world where the relationship between technology and tourism is stronger than ever, tourists' behaviour and their ways of engaging with the industry are changing. Amid the Covid-19 pandemic, tourism stakeholders embraced existing and new technological solutions to cope with the pandemic's difficulties. For instance, businesses in the tourist sector have started accepting only contactless payments, which encourages using smartphones and wearable devices such as smartwatches to pay. Airports and airlines have provided a growing number of self-check-in and self-bag drop machines. Theatres and sports venues have started to accept only digital tickets, and restaurants rapidly embraced digital menus through QR codes and ordering apps, to name a few. Therefore, technology will keep playing an essential role in different areas of tourism.

3.6 Conclusion

This chapter provided a general overview of VR, including its history, evolution, concept, and how its applications have been explored in tourism research. The main developments and innovations that shaped VR were presented in a timeline that described how these innovations evolved into what we have today. The discussion on the concept of VR and its main characteristics helped in defining and differentiating the terms VR and 360-degree video, establishing the meaning used in this thesis. Exploring the relationship between technology, tourism, and VR applications in tourism helped in critically reviewing the main research on the field, identifying findings and the gaps that this study attempts to fill. This chapter gives the reader an overview of VR technology to better understand it and serves as a building block for the study.

The history and evolution of VR were illustrated in a Gartner Hype Cycle as a manner of a timeline. This cycle is a graphic representation of an alleged common pattern emerging technologies follow in relation to expectation and time. The timeline chronologically described the main innovations that evolved into current VR, presenting their intentions and designs. It can be concluded that current VR results from years of research, development, and the combination of different concepts such as stereoscopic vision, telepresence and panorama. The presented Hype Cycle was only intended to represent a timeline graphically, and it was not made with Gartner Inc. data; it was solely based on an own perceptive interpretation of the phenomenon and used as a narrative structure.

The concept of VR was established based on definitions from different authors. The three main characteristics of VR are that it provides an immersive experience through the visualisation of a Virtual Environment, and the interaction with it. Under this definition, this chapter defended the position that 360-degree video is indeed a type of VR as it could meet such characteristics under certain circumstances. This video format can be played on different platforms and devices, including low-cost HMDs for mobile VR. When played on an HMD, it provides an immersive experience making the user feel transported to a different place by presenting a Virtual Environment made of footage of real scenes, which may offer a degree of interaction. However, to avoid any confusion, this thesis uses the term VR to refer to the general technology that uses HMDs, and 360-degree video to refer to the specific format that is part of the different types of experiences that VR offers.

This chapter explored the role of technology in tourism, presenting different applications of VR in the tourism industry. Tourism today is strongly related to technology, from the management of airlines and hotels to the tourists' decision-making. Potential tourists use technology on their everyday lives, and it is an essential element in their search for destinations. Tourists

are now more informed and share more information with other tourists on social media. Several shared media channels, such as YouTube, Google Maps, Facebook, and TripAdvisor, allow users to leave reviews and share information with other interested users. Moreover, those platforms support 360-degree videos and photographs. For instance, Google Maps' street view feature presents photographic material of almost any city in 360 degrees allowing users to add their own. Likewise, YouTube and Facebook support 360-degree video with an integrated VR functionality that splits the screen in two, providing a stereoscopic mode for mobile HMDs. Therefore, this chapter highlighted the potential of VR in the promotion of tourist destinations.

Finally, this chapter reviewed relevant literature on the field of eTourism. Studies with similar goals and intentions were critically analysed, identifying their different streams and approaches. That brought the conclusion that the literature on the field lacks qualitative studies and practical considerations. Most research has conducted quantitative studies with statistical analysis of participants' responses. Moreover, most of them focused on analysing existing platforms and existing 360-degree videos. That presents an opportunity to contribute to the field by bringing both qualitative and practical perspectives by producing and testing a 360-degree video specially created for the aims of this study.

Chapter 4. Mexico, tourism, and the Magical Towns programme

4.1 Introduction

Having examined the history and evolution of VR and 360-degree video in the previous chapter, this chapter contextualises Mexican tourism and the Magical Towns programme. Compared to other Latin American countries, Mexico enjoys a privileged geographical position. Mexico is located in North America, with coastlines on the Atlantic and Pacific oceans. On the Atlantic Ocean, the coastline covers the Gulf of Mexico and the Caribbean Sea; on the Pacific Ocean, Mexico has a long coastline, including the Gulf of California. The country has matured a model for developing seaside resorts in these locations, becoming a major international beach destination. However, cultural tourism has gained relevance in the past 20 years as successive governments have looked at the country's rich cultural and heritage attractions inland. Therefore, this chapter provides background knowledge about Mexico's tourism industry, its cultural tourism, and the Magical Towns programme. It explores how the country's cultural and historical heritage is incorporated into tourism products beyond seaside resorts and their role in constructing and promoting Mexico's country identity, branding, image, and reputation.

This chapter is divided into five sections. First, it introduces Mexico's tourism industry, looking at its evolution, current state, and importance on the Mexican economy. Then, it examines the construction of Mexico's country identity, branding, image, and reputation in two separate sections. Particularly, those two sections focus on Mexico's self-perception and self-interpretation, the role of the media in disseminating them, representations of Mexico in the US-American media and its influence in shaping Mexico's international image. Next, it looks at Mexico's cultural tourism, addressing some common issues related to capitalising on culture and heritage for tourism. The final section provides an overview of the Magical Towns programme describing its evolution, aims, selection criteria, and the application processes towns follow to join. It also focuses on its branding, promotion, and international impact, and it lists previous research addressing the Magical Towns programme in different disciplines. This chapter is essential for understanding Mexico, the importance of tourism to its economy, and the Magical Towns programme.

4.2 Mexico as a tourist destination

Tourism to Mexico began in the late 1800s and early 1900s. Early forms of tourism emerged with the increasing construction of infrastructure such as railways and roads. This period was

characterised by the lack of domestic tourism, a growing number of international tourists, and the establishment of the first travel agencies and hotels (Ibáñez and Cabrera, 2011, p. 48). In 1921, Fernando Barbachano Peón gathered a group of passengers to explore the Yucatán peninsula, a land of pristine beauty that today hosts most of Mexico's international tourism. Barbachano was regarded as a pioneer in the Mexican tourism industry, a Mexican Thomas Cook or Fred Harvey (Evans, 2004, p. 320). It was in 1922 when the first organised group of tourists appeared, along with the creation of hotel associations (Ibáñez and Cabrera, 2011, p. 48).

President Plutarco Elías Calles promulgated the first modern immigration law on 15 January 1926, introducing the concept of tourists. The law defined them as foreigners visiting the country for leisure with short stays of no longer than six months. On 6 July 1929, President Emilio Portes Gil established the Pro Tourism Mixed Commission, the first official tourism organisation in the country (Ibáñez and Cabrera, 2011, p. 49). However, while travel was part of US-American culture, leisure travel was not part of Mexican culture. Most Mexicans lived in rural areas except for the elites, who could afford to travel. For this reason, the government did not invest much in promoting domestic tourism. A Mexican middle class capable of producing mass tourism within Mexico did not appear until the 1940s (Berger, 2006a, p. 110).

Mexico and the US made joint efforts to encourage intervisitation, which improved friendship and relations between the two countries. From 1940 to 1941, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt established the 'year of inter-American travel' in the US, and President Lázaro Cárdenas del Río declared it 'the tourist biennial' in Mexico. The private sector echoed the binational project founding the Inter-American Hotel Association, contributing to the Good Neighbour Policy (Berger, 2010, p. 110). Under President Manuel Ávila Camacho, Mexico entered WWII on the Allies' side, and consequently, the tourism industry plunged abruptly and stagnated.

In the immediate post-war period, Mexico experienced an accelerated reactivation and development of its tourism industry. For Berger (2006a, p. 13), the number of visitors and profit reflected the country's stability, peace, progress and the government's efforts to build the emerging tourism industry. Bringing tourists to national treasures like beaches, colonial architecture, monuments, archaeological sites, and the cosmopolitan Mexico City increased national pride and helped build national unity. Tourism companies and organisations began promoting the idea that Mexico's offer far exceeded what tourists could find in other places like Europe or Asia. The federal government passed the first law to protect colonial monuments and Mesoamerican archaeological sites. Later, Taxco and Patzcuaro passed local regulations and programmes to preserve what was considered to be characteristically Mexican. By revaluing

Mexico's richness through tourism, Mexicans reinforced their national identity fuelling a nationalist discourse.

Under President Miguel Alemán Valdés, the country entered the world's tourist market. The government constructed large tourism centres, and tourism became a priority, occupying a privileged position in planning economic and social development as one of the country's most important economic activities (Ibáñez and Cabrera, 2011, p. 52). President Alemán is known as the modern 'father of Mexican tourism' as he invested heavily in developing the industry, consolidating, modernising, and professionalising Mexican tourism, transforming the country's image from small working-class towns and village markets to modern and metropolitan urban areas (Lindsay, 2019, p. 24).

The 1950s were known as the Mexican Miracle, a golden age of capitalism that brought further improvements in communication routes, among other benefits. Mexico developed essential projects like constructing superhighways such as the four-lane road from Nogales to Guadalajara and Mexico City to Acapulco, Puebla, and Cuernavaca (Lindsay, 2019, p. 95). These connections connected and complemented the existing offer of border cities like Ciudad Juárez, Tecate, and Tijuana (Saldaña, 2014, p. 110). Acapulco became the first international destination for US-Americans gaining international fame due to its motorway connections and the growing aviation industry (Turner and Ash, 1975; Velázquez, 2013, p. 67). In 1953, Mexico hosted its first National Tourism Congress, and air traffic in Mexico City, Guadalajara and Acapulco increased (Sherman, 2010, p. 548; Lindsay, 2019, p. 95).

In the 1960s, US-American businesses' interests boosted Mexican industrialisation thanks to the country's expanding relationship with the US (Lindsay, 2019, p. 24), causing solid improvements to Mexico's tourism regulations. On 5 December 1962, the National Council for Tourism, the Department of Tourism, and the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM) established the Mexican Institute for Tourism Research, the country's first institution to study socioeconomic aspects of tourism. On 14 August 1967, new regulations for tour guides and drivers came into effect under President Gustavo Díaz Ordaz. Additionally, on 10 October 1969, rules for travel agents regulated these service providers (Ibáñez and Cabrera, 2011, pp. 55-56). All those regulations led to the technification of Mexico's tourism.

In the early 1970s, under President Luis Echeverría, tourism became more relevant to the country's social and economic development. On 28 January 1974, a new Federal Law for Tourism created the Direction for Social Tourism. Changes in the law for Secretariats and Departments of State raised the Department of Tourism, renaming it the Secretariat of Tourism, a higher entity to oversee tourism (Ibáñez and Cabrera, 2011, p. 57; Lindsay, 2019). Consequently, the Trust for the Guarantee and Promotion of Tourism (FOGATUR) and the Trust for

the Promotion of Tourism Infrastructure (INFRATUR) merged to form a single trust known as the National Fund for Tourism Development (FONATUR), gathering previous years' experience assessing and financing tourist projects (Ibáñez and Cabrera, 2011, p. 57; Oehmichen Bazán, 2013, pp. 20-21; Saldaña, 2014, p. 111). In 1975, the Secretariat of Tourism became the official leading tourism body, and beach resorts experienced a boom with increased private investment.

With FONATUR, the government strategically built seaside tourism centres that attracted tourists and investors. With this fund, the Secretariat of Tourism built the first Integrally Planned Centres developing four destinations: Cancún, Ixtapa-Zihuatanejo, Los Cabos, and Huatulco, drawing tourism away from the busy cities of Monterrey, Guadalajara, and Mexico City (Lindsay, 2019, p. 25). Those Integrally Planned Centres had a contentious cost associated with their planning and construction. According to Clancy (2001b, p. 134), some places were inhabited, and little information about consulting residents regarding the project and its effects on their lives is available. There was opposition to expropriating land, conflicts between the local population and the state, and multiple reports of forced relocation and violence. These actions revealed FONATUR's interest in developing tourism for business benefit, not the people's. Mexico's structural changes in its tourism management in the 1970s shaped the present Mexican tourism infrastructure.

The terms Presidents Miguel de la Madrid (1982-1988), Carlos Salinas de Gortari (1988-1994), and Ernesto Zedillo (1994-2000) challenged the old post-revolutionary nationalism with the nascent neoliberalism of private economic interests. Neoliberal ideas imported from the US brought a period of transformation with significant economic and political reforms based on free trade and a new nationalism to 'reinvent Mexico' (O'Toole, 2010, p. 4). The switch from presidents with law degrees to upper-class economy graduates from prestigious US-American universities started a technocratic regime of economists, a blossoming debt crisis, and the dawning of Mexican neoliberalism (Babb, 2018, p. 171). President Salinas consolidated these processes, negotiating the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA, today replaced by USMCA), integrating Mexican trade with the US and Canada, and ending decades of state-controlled industry by privatising the working-class-built state-owned enterprises (Coffey, 2010, p. 278). As a result, the government's central position in tourism was eroded, allowing foreign capital to gain a more prominent influence on the market (Osorio-García and Novo, 2020, p. 109).

Mexican tourism consolidated in the 1990s, becoming a major tourist destination. Despite the 1994 Peso crisis and the devaluation of the currency resulting from the economic liberalism imposed by President Salinas (O'Toole, 2010, p. 16), the country became the first destination

in Latin America, receiving about 40% of all the international arrivals in the Western Hemisphere outside of Canada and the US (Clancy, 2001a, p. 10; Oehmichen Bazán, 2013, p. 19; Saldaña, 2014, p. 110; Lindsay, 2019, p. 25). State-driven Integrally Planned Centres soon became a hotspot for international tourists and thousands of middle-class Mexicans. NAFTA strengthened the relationship between Canada, the US, and Mexico, encouraging Mexico's international promotion and the diversification of its tourism. The industry started offering a wide variety of attractions such as shopping centres, restaurants, bars, sports venues, art museums, archaeological sites, ecological parks, and seaside resorts while focusing on the development of other exclusive destinations such as Cabo San Lucas (Berger and Wood, 2010, p. 8). The government started looking at developing other types of tourism within the country.

In 2001, President Vicente Fox Quesada presented his National Tourism Programme. The plan consisted of executing state and regional-level programmes and strategies designed to make tourism a national priority and one of the most vital economic activities for the country (SECTUR, 2001; 2002a; 2002b). During this period, the Magical Towns programme was established as a government's strategy to diversify the country's tourism industry (SECTUR, 2001, p. 168). By the mid-2000s, Cancún had over 200 hotels and resorts, becoming the leading destination in Mexico and one of the main ones in Latin America (Evans, 2004, p. 320). Nevertheless, the violence of the war on drugs in 2006, the 2008 global financial crisis, the Influenza A/H1N1 pandemic in 2009, and the Mexicana airline bankruptcy in 2010 hindered attracting new investors. In response, President Felipe Calderón Hinojosa designated 2011 'the year of tourism in Mexico' (Hiriart, 2012, p. 18), and in 2012, FONATUR restructured its model, focusing on helping small-scale projects and SMEs (OECD, 2017, p. 27; SECTUR, 2018a, p. 72).

During President Enrique Peña Nieto's administration (2012-2018), Mexico prioritised tourism as part of the national agenda. The tourism industry contributed 8.7% of Mexico's annual GDP in 2018 (see Figure 4.1 and Figure 4.2) (INEGI, 2019; SECTUR, 2020e), consolidated as one of the main engines of the economy (SECTUR, 2018a, p. 79). The country's southeast region offers the Mexican Caribbean destinations of Isla Mujeres, Cancún, Playa del Carmen, Cozumel, and Tulum and hosted almost half of the international arrivals (47.5%) and nearly two-thirds of international stays (62%) (OECD, 2017, p. 18). Tourism became a platform for Mexico's development by creating jobs and business opportunities and facilitating the renovation of communities and tourist destinations (SECTUR, 2018a, p. 78).

With President Andrés Manuel López Obrador's taking office in 2018, the national project aims to smash old practices of corruption and nepotism to reduce economic and social inequalities. His government recognises the contrast between the wealthy Integrally Planned Centres and the deprivation of the rest of the state where those destinations are located (SECTUR,

2019b). The national tourism strategy provides a model based on a fairer and more balanced development using tourism as a tool for social integration. In that sense, the government cancelled Mexico City's new airport at 30% of its construction (Monterrubio *et al.*, 2020), constructing a new airport in the Santa Lucia military base instead, and dissolved the Council for Tourism Promotion (CPTM), replacing it with a Council for Tourism Diplomacy, a departure from traditional strategies (Osorio-García and Novo, 2020, p. 115; Cabrera, 2022, p. 191).

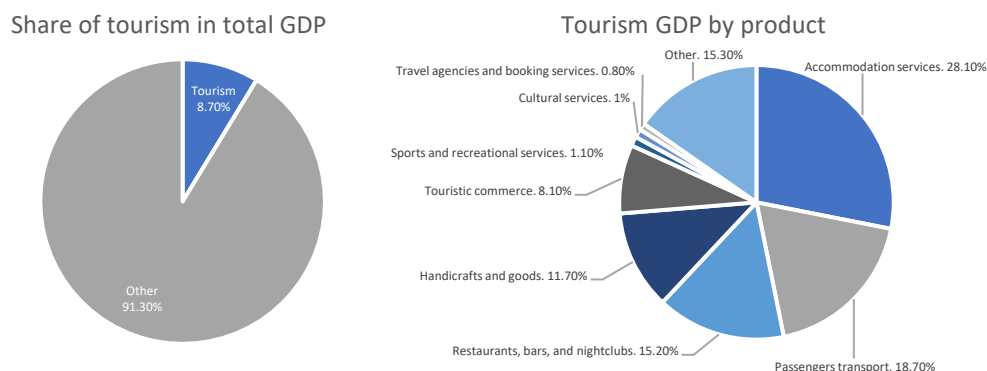


Figure 4.1. The contribution of Tourism to Mexico's annual GDP (INEGI, 2019).



Figure 4.2. The contribution of Tourism to Mexico's annual GDP by year.

Today, Mexico is the most visited country in Latin America and one of the world's most visited countries. Its place in the world ranking has changed over time (see Figure 4.3). Mexico remained the 8th most visited country globally, reaching its peak as the 7th in 2005 (UNWTO, 2001; 2002; 2003; 2004; 2005; 2006). However, it dropped to the 10th position in 2007 and did not appear in the Top Ten in 2012 and 2013 (UNWTO, 2007; 2008; 2009; 2010; 2011; 2012; 2013; 2014). That situation coincided with President Calderón's administration and the War on Drugs' most violent years. In 2014, 2015, and 2016 Mexico reappeared in the 10th, 9th, and 8th positions, respectively (UNWTO, 2015; 2016; 2017b). In 2017 Mexico became the top destination in Latin America (SECTUR, 2018a, p. 34), reaching the 6th position (UNWTO, 2018)

but dropping back to the 7th position in 2018 (UNWTO, 2019). Today, Mexico remains the 7th most visited country in the world (UNWTO, 2021). Its constant presence in the UNWTO annual Top Ten and the increasing number of international arrivals (see Figure 4.4) reflect international tourists' growing interest in Mexico.

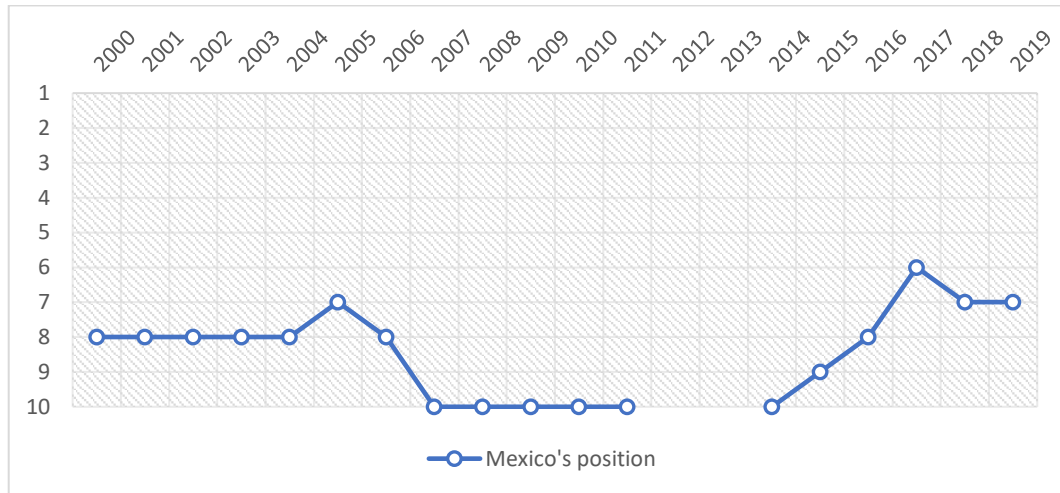


Figure 4.3. Mexico's position in the Top Ten of the most visited countries in the world according to the United Nations World Tourism Organisation.

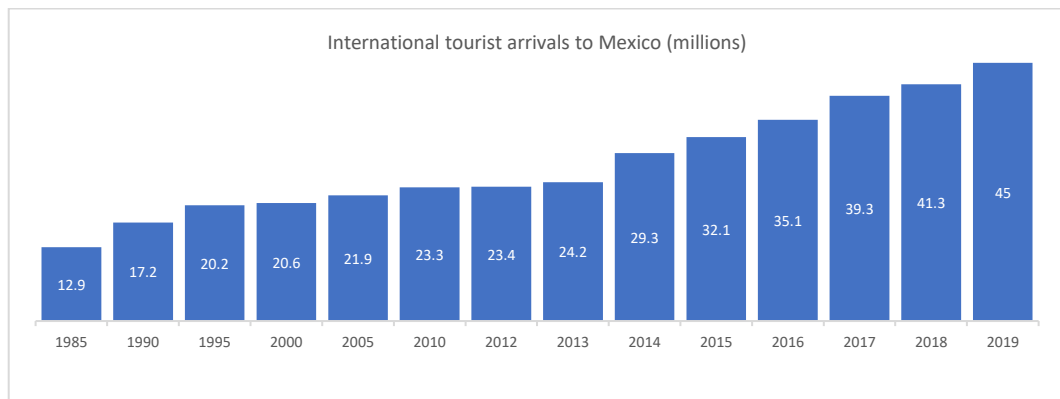


Figure 4.4. International arrivals in Mexico by year (SECTUR, 2019a).

Mexico has traditionally targeted the US as its primary market, but other countries have steadily increased their visits. Figure 4.5 shows the percentage of international air arrivals by targeted market region. Most international tourists arriving by land do it through one of the official 53 US-Mexico border crossings. This border records more than 350 million legal crossings annually, making it one of the world's busiest borders. The UK has become Mexico's third-biggest market, just behind the US and Canada (see Table 4.1) (SECTUR, 2018a, p. 40). European tourists arrive by air, with Cancún and Mexico City being the two airports with the most international arrivals. In a 2017 study, the OECD found that Mexico has excellent air connectivity between the market's origin and the main tourist destinations (see OECD, 2017). In other words, the US, Canada, and the UK have straightforward access to Cancún, Puerto

Vallarta, and Los Cabos. In contrast, connectivity from continental Europe and South America is weaker. Travellers must connect flights in Mexico City or another North American hub to reach places without direct flights.

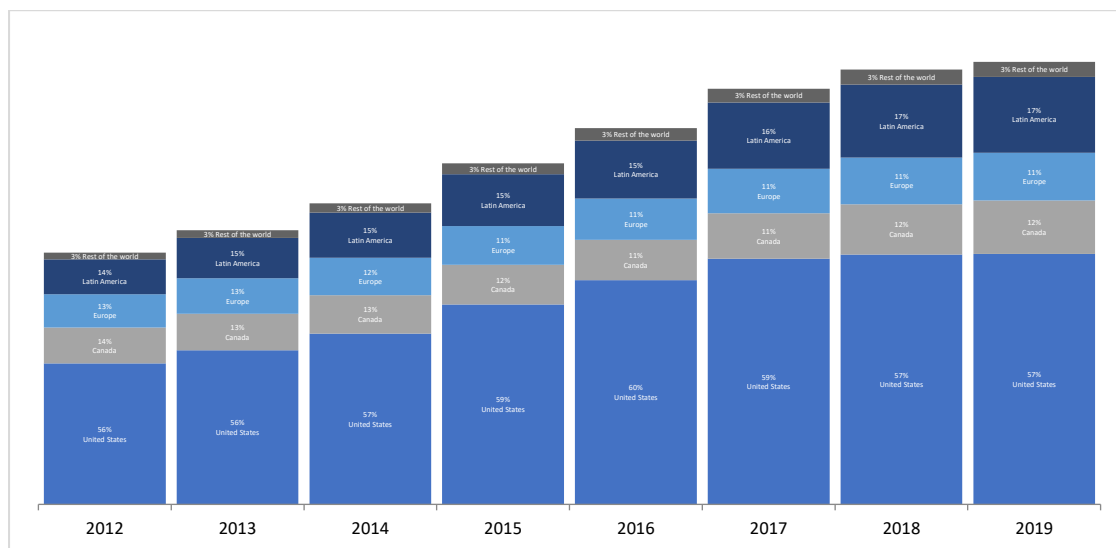


Figure 4.5. International arrivals to Mexico by targeted market (SECTUR, 2019a).

Number of visitors per country in 2019		
1	United States	10,775,249
2	Canada	2,296,061
3	United Kingdom	559,037
4	Colombia	536,175
5	Brasil	359,981
6	Argentina	350,960
7	Spain	296,134
8	Peru	266,677
9	France	261,590
10	Germany	259,643

Table 4.1. Number of visitors to Mexico by country (SECTUR, 2019a).

Finally, Mexico's transportation infrastructure is still improving. President López Obrador is reactivating rail connectivity by constructing new urban train routes and building the Maya Train (Tren Maya). The train will interconnect Mundo Maya to transport tourists, workers, and goods, across the Yucatán Peninsula and Central America. This is perhaps Mexico's most ambitious tourism infrastructure project (Cabrera, 2022, p. 187). The train will not only benefit the states where it runs but will encourage passenger train routes to be re-established across the country and complement the cruise ship activity, which is mainly concentrated in a small number of ports of call in the region with Cozumel as one of the busiest cruise ports in the world (OECD, 2017, p. 22). Mexico has a good motorway infrastructure, especially in northern and central states, with high-quality toll roads. However, motorways in the border states have been the scene of drug-related armed conflicts and kidnappings, and the US government has repeatedly advised not to travel to specific states. The limited international direct air connectivity, and

the challenging ground transportation, reduces the attractiveness of destinations beyond Cancún and Mexico City, the two main airports. Tourism in Mexico is still recovering from the Covid-19 pandemic effects.

4.3 Mexico's Country Identity and Branding

Mexican identity is the result of two worlds coming together, the mix of European and Indigenous American racial and cultural characteristics. Before the arrival of the Spaniards, the Americas were rich in indigenous civilizations. In 1492 Christopher Columbus landed in the Bahamas, followed by several European explorers. In 1519, the Spanish conquistador Hernán Cortés arrived in what is now Mexico, and in 1521, helped by indigenous tribes, overthrew the Mexica (Aztec) Empire, starting a 300-year Spanish rule (Knight, 2002a; Restall, 2018). In 1535 the viceroyalty of New Spain was born as a political entity to govern the territories, imposing the Spanish culture, language, and religion over the indigenous. A phenomenon of ethnic and racial intermixing known as *mestizaje* brought a caste system categorising people into groups of Indians, Africans, Spaniards, Criollos (Spaniards born in New Spain), and subdivisions such as Mestizo, Indomestizo, and Afromestizo (see Figure 4.6) (Knight, 2002b; Hellier-Tinoco, 2011, p. 54). By the late 18th and early 19th centuries, forms of nationalism started to emerge. Criollo nationalism was born around the idea of self-sufficiency, while indigenous people celebrated their Meso and North American roots (Brading, 1985; 1991). The legacy of these ideological positions persisted throughout independent Mexico.



Figure 4.6. Painting of the caste system in New Spain illustrating the different degrees of intermixture of people. *Las Castas* (Unknown artist, Museo Nacional del Virreinato, Tepotzotlan, Mexico. CC BY-NC-ND 4.0).

The history of independent Mexico is full of war, instability, and division. After a series of armed conflicts that began in 1810, Mexico declared independence in 1821. In the subsequent decades, Mexico lost more than half of its territory with the Republic of Texas' unrecognised independence in 1836 (eventually annexed to the US in 1846) and the Mexican-American War between 1846 and 1848. Mexico lost the war and ceded California, Nevada, Arizona, Utah, and New Mexico, and parts of Wyoming, Colorado, Kansas, and Oklahoma to the US (Weber, 1982). France invaded Mexico in 1864 and occupied the country until 1867 in the Second French Intervention. The French, helped by the Mexican conservative and royalist elites, imposed an Austrian Habsburg emperor to rule the country under the name of Maximilian I of Mexico in a polarised country divided between liberals and conservatives. Maximilian was executed by President Benito Juárez, a man of Zapotec ethnicity who was the first (and still only) Mexican president of fully indigenous heritage. President Juárez was also the first indigenous person to lead a country in the Americas, and this fed the indigenist discourse that shaped the identity of the time.

Between 1877 and 1910, the period known as *Porfiriato*, the ruling of elitist President Porfirio Díaz, Mexico, started showcasing its cultural heritage. Initially, the Porfirian elites adopted Eurocentric racist ideas and sought to change Mexico's image, which was seen as an 'inferior' country of indigenous and mestizo people, to incentivise foreign investment and immigration from Europe. President Díaz modernised Mexico by imitating French architectonic styles to make it appear more European, more 'modern' and less 'backward' (Hellier-Tinoco, 2011, p. 55). However, he started showcasing Mexico's indigenous heritage as a past glory replaced by modernity. His government used Mexico's pre-Columbian heritage to impress Europeans and put Mexico on the same level as countries that emanated from great civilizations like ancient Egypt, Greece, and the Roman Empire. He soon built new rooms in the National Museum where the Mexica (Aztec) culture dominated the scene with pieces like the Sun Stone, and he built an impressive Aztec-themed pavilion at the 1889 Paris World's Fair (see Figure 4.7) (Tenorio-Trillo, 1996; Bueno, 2010, p. 55; Schuster, 2018, pp. 80-87). Ironically, it was its antiquity that strengthened Mexico's presence. Mexico was stepping out onto the world scene as never before by exalting its indigenous origin.

According to Bueno (2010), the centenary celebrations of Mexico's independence in 1910 included parades, speeches, public ceremonies, banquets and monuments highlighting Mexico's past glory. The government took advantage of a trend of upper-class Europeans regularly visiting ancient ruins throughout Italy and Greece during the famous Cook's tours in the late 19th century and restored Teotihuacan, one of Mexico's most famous archaeological sites, to show foreign visitors the greatness of Mexico's pre-Columbian heritage. They chose

Teotihuacan because it was large, monumental, impressive, and close to Mexico City. Moreover, it represented the Mexica people (Aztecs), the dominant ancient culture in central Mexico, where most archaeological expeditions were taking place. Leopoldo Bartres oversaw Teotihuacan's restoration and built Mexico's first state-sponsored on-site museum with more than 8,000 objects from the excavation. By the end of 1910, the Mexican civil war, known as The Revolution, started as an armed conflict against President Díaz, who spent more than 30 years in power (Knight, 1990b).

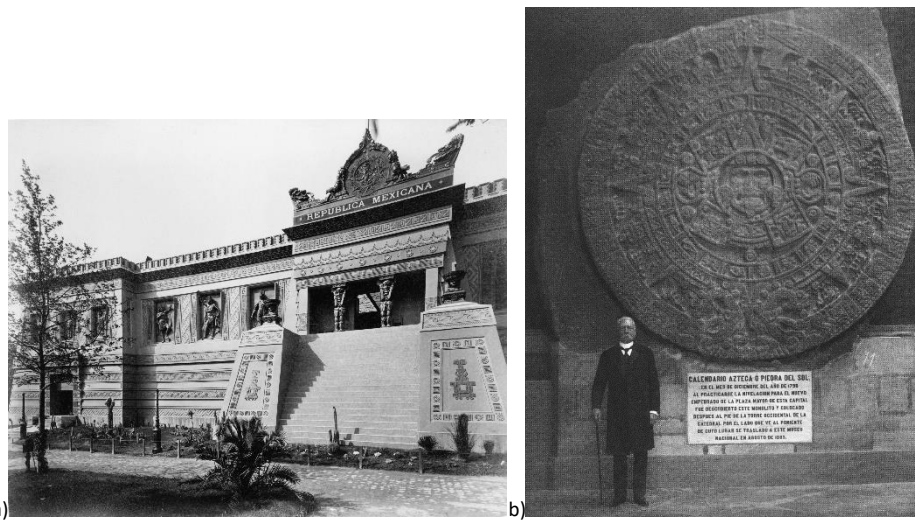


Figure 4.7. Photographs of Mexico showcasing its heritage during the Porfiriato. a) The Mexican Pavilion at the 1889 Paris World's Fair (Library of Congress, PD). b) President Díaz standing next to the Aztec Sun Stone (by A. Carrillo, PD, Archivo General de la Nación).

The Mexican Revolution brought about many socio-political changes in the country. After over a decade of different armed conflicts, Mexicans were divided, and the constitution of 1917, promoted by President Venustiano Carranza, attempted to unify and bring stability through new nationalistic ideals (Knight, 1990a; Hellier-Tinoco, 2011, p. 56). The ideas of the time started shaping a national identity through the arts, music, literature, and education. In this nation-building process, many cultural symbols (original and recycled) were crucial in constructing post-revolutionary Mexico's identity. On the one hand, *indigenismo* revived revalorising Mexico's indigenous heritage to incorporate the indigenous communities in the national project. On the other hand, concepts like *mexicanidad* or *lo mexicano*, became umbrella terms for grouping what is truly Mexican, acknowledging both Spanish and indigenous origins, in a single mestizo identity. Both philosophical movements helped give self-awareness of racial, social, and class attributes that were seen as authentic expressions of Mexican culture and reflected identities resulting from the *mestizaje* (Hellier-Tinoco, 2011, p. 26; Gaytán, 2017, p. 67).

The mestizo identity provided the key to Mexico's future, being neither indigenous nor European but quintessentially Mexican (Hellier-Tinoco, 2011, p. 58). Intellectual mestizos living

in urban areas led these movements attempting to revendicate indigenous aspects of Mexican culture as part of Mexico's national identity (Acevedo, 2016, p. 176). The Mexican nationalist discourse identified what is truly Mexican and inspired a sense of pride and belonging among the country's inhabitants, encouraging a preference for their own culture over the foreign (Pérez, 2016, p. 310). However, creating such a mixed-race Hispanic national identity negatively affected many sectors of the population as the national discourse aimed to Mexicanise the indigenous people and not to indigenise Mexico (Hellier-Tinoco, 2011, p. 58).

The unity discourse among mestizos was evident. In these movements, intellectuals and artists used different forms of expression that reflected and promoted the sentiment of the time. For instance, revolutionary and post-revolutionary publications such as Mariano Azuela's novel *Los de Abajo* (The Underdogs) (1915) portrayed the nationalistic sentiment of preferring the local over the foreign, Manuel Gamio's *Forjando Patria* (Forging a Nation) (1916) proposed the cultural assimilation of indigenous peoples into the mestizo nation, and José Vasconcelos' *La Raza Cósmica* (The Cosmic Race) (1925) described mestizo as the ideal race. By 1929, *Los de Abajo* had become a modern classic portraying the struggles of the Mexican working class and promoting an image of machos drinking tequila and fighting in the revolution (Gaytán, 2017, p. 67). Moreover, muralists, such as Diego Rivera, promoted *mexicanidad* by painting Mexican everyday life and the inequalities that continued to exist after the revolution. Items from shared origin became associated with *lo mexicano*, such as the black clay pots from Oaxaca, the guitars from Paracho, and clothing like the *Adelita* costume worn at parades and celebrations (Pérez, 2016, p. 309).

While *lo mexicano* rose, tourism emerged in the 1920s as another way to establish a national identity. Beach destinations and archaeological sites were the main attractions. The former showcased Mexico as a modern nation, and the latter, constructed a mythical past of pre-Columbian glory. Archaeological sites followed the post-revolutionary discourse, revindicating Mexico's indigenous origin and providing numerous symbols that allowed the commercialisation of indigenous imagery for tourism (Velázquez, 2013, p. 75). The promotion of Mexican destinations became nationalist, with patriotic language and national symbols (Berger, 2006a, p. 15). Mexican cultural expressions, such as The Old Men dance or the Day of the Dead celebrations in Michoacán, transitioned from being local to becoming public spectacles that eventually became synonyms of Mexico worldwide (Hellier-Tinoco, 2011, p. 26). They became distinctively Mexican and began to appear in promotional material. Ranchera music and traditional dances began to appear in the media as representative of different regions of the country (Pérez, 2016, p. 307).

According to Lindsay (2019, p. 6), numerous magazines and publications emerged disseminating Mexican culture. There were many publications with pedagogical, political, and avant-garde titles. The Secretariat of Education edited pedagogical publications, like *El Maestro* (The Teacher) (1921-1923) and *El libro y el pueblo* (The book and the people) (1922-1970). Working-class political publications included *El Machete* (The Machete) (1924) and *Revista CROM* (CROM Magazine) (1925). There were also avant-garde magazines that showcased Mexican arts and creative trends, such as *Forma: Revista de artes plásticas* (Form: Plastic Arts Magazine) (1926-1928), *Horizonte* (Horizon) (1926–1927), *Ulises* (Ulysses) (1928), *Contemporáneos* (Contemporaries) (1928-1931), and *Crisol* (Melting Pot) (1929-1934). Furthermore, the National Tourism Commission published the National Tourist Magazine in English and Spanish to gain support for the emerging Mexican tourism industry. A series of essays in the single-issue magazine encouraged Mexicans and US-Americans to support tourism for its economic benefit and improve relations and understanding between both countries. By promoting the government's safe and modern travel actions, the publication aimed to change the perception of Mexico among US-Americans (Berger, 2006a, p. 33). Thus, publications portraying Mexican culture and arts promoted Mexican identity and ideas to foreigners and Mexicans alike.

According to Berger (2006a, pp. 74-97), the Autonomous Department of Press and Publicity was part of the Secretariat of Interior's Office of Information, the first department promoting Mexico internationally. Their publications included tourist guides, magazines, and maps highlighting routes to Acapulco, Puebla, Cuernavaca, and Queretaro. From 1937 to 1938, this department published a colourful magazine called Mexican Art & Life (see Figure 4.8). In 1939 José Rivera, the department's general secretary, published *Publicidad Turística de México* (Mexico Tourist Advertising), an advertising guide for tourist associations and businesses. Advertisers started using the image of an indigenous woman dressed in regional clothing in magazines, guidebooks, and posters. Her identity varied from Veracruz, Puebla, or Tehuantepec. She personified Mexico, with dark skin representing the indigenous roots and a smile symbolising people's welcoming friendliness. In 1942, the Tourism Department replaced the indigenous woman with a mestiza dressed as *china poblana*, and sometimes in Mexico and Veracruz clothing (see Figure 4.9). They distributed Visit Mexico posters with her image throughout the US. Although the department professionalised and improved the quality of international promotional material, it lacked offices abroad, and the staff showed ignorance regarding the foreign targeted publics (Dümmer, 2018, p. 308).



Figure 4.8. Mexican Art & Life Magazine covers (UTSA Libraries Special Collections).

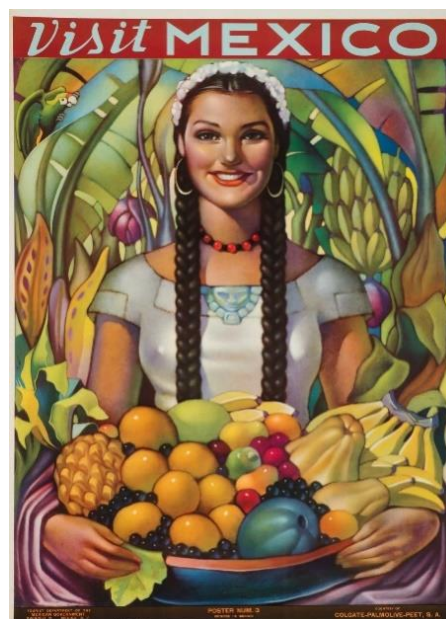


Figure 4.9. A famous Visit Mexico poster distributed internationally by the Tourism Department (by Jorge González Camarena).

Mexican folklore satisfied the tourist gaze and created a collective gaze. Collective gaze in either nationalism or country image involves a process of reproduction, representation, and signification. This is achieved using different tools like signs, photographs, brochures, souvenirs, films, and postcards. These images are repeated and reproduced endlessly, constructing a notion of ‘the most representative or the typical of that region’ (Hellier-Tinoco, 2011, p. 45). In the process of reinforcing images, symbols, icons, music, ideas, and representations of what is supposed to be Mexico, tourists get a uniform representation, thus forming a collective tourist gaze (Hellier-Tinoco, 2011, p. 45; Urry and Larsen, 2011). The repeated emphasis on ‘typical Mexico’ created artificial or theatricalised cultural representations without historical or traditional background, often presented to tourists, visitors, or television audiences for mere entertainment (Pérez, 2016, pp. 310-311). The lack of knowledge and information about specific indigenous cultures often falls into the unintentional repetition of clichés and stereotypes to satisfy the tourist gaze.

For Hellier-Tinoco (2011, p. 45), a collective gaze produces a process of ‘essentialisation’ that reduces the diversity of a country into single standardised elements. A collective gaze unifies the diversity of several regions into common icons that represent them all equally. In Mexico, diversity was essentialised on two levels. On a regional level, the country’s federalist structure allowed the promotion of regional food, traditions, dance, music, and clothing to represent entire states with their flag, coat of arms, and anthem, thus creating their cultural identity. On a national level, what was unique to specific states became *the* typical Mexican things, homogenising the country and ignoring other cultural expressions. For instance, the diversity of Mexican food was reduced to a few dishes, such as tacos, mole, and enchiladas (Pilcher, 1998; Pilcher, 2010). Mariachi, tequila, and *charrería* from Jalisco became *the* Mexican music, drink, and sport, and the entire country adopted the Day of the Dead festivity, including places where it has never been a tradition. The country’s diversity was ‘essentialised’ to create a national unity highlighting the dichotomy of being all different but a single nation.

Mariachi music has represented Mexico internationally for many years. Although mariachi bands originated in rural Jalisco, modern mariachi was born in Mexico City in the 1930s, when rural mariachi bands migrated and improved their music skills. They were no longer farmers but full-time musicians with access to better opportunities (Martínez, 2016, p. 190). Modern mariachi is a social construction that resulted from the country’s *Mexicanisation*. By the mid-20th century, the government utilised modern mariachi as a political tool to build identity and unify the people after the Mexican Revolution (Hellier-Tinoco, 2011, p. 42). The media played a crucial role in disseminating and exporting modern mariachi music appearing in numerous records, films, the radio, and early television shows, displacing rural mariachi and becoming

Mexico's traditional music (Martínez, 2016, p. 190; Pérez, 2016, p. 328). Songs like *Jarabe Tapatío*, the charro and *china poblana* costumes, and rodeos became part of *lo mexicano* (Jáuregui, 1990; Pérez, 1994, pp. 113-138; Pérez, 2016, pp. 328-329) as the education system promoted them as Mexican folklore in the curricula. The post-revolutionary governments fabricated cultural authenticity through the media, constructing national popular values and a national identity that presented mariachi as *the* Mexican music (Martínez, 2016, pp. 200-201).

The media played an essential role in disseminating the newly constructed Mexican folklore. Mexican novels like *Los de Abajo* (The Underdogs) that depicted the Mexican working-class struggles during the revolution evolved into films in a period known as the Golden Age of Mexican Cinema (c. 1930-1969). In this period, the Hollywood industry was severely affected by WWII, and Mexico began producing and exporting films, contributing to the construction of Mexico's identity and image by portraying attributes associated with *mexicanidad* and *lo mexicano* (Gaytán, 2017, p. 67). This Golden Age brought the *comedia ranchera* genre, a Western melodrama that frequently featured a charro protagonist drinking tequila at the local cantina in the rural countryside (see Figure 4.10). In portraying rural revolutionary Mexico, filmmakers used the imagery of horses, cacti, agave, roosters, rustic ranches, and rich haciendas. The stories were frequently set in Jalisco, where masculine, brave charros saved the day by fighting the villains. The Mexican charro embodied the deep-rooted Mexican masculinity full of sexism, appealing to different audiences from different backgrounds (Gaytán, 2017, p. 68).



Figure 4.10. Assorted images of scenes from *Los Tres García* and *¡Ay Jalisco no te rajes!* (Copr. Producciones Rodríguez Hermanos, 1947 and 1941). The golden age of Mexican cinema contributed to disseminating the stereotypical charro.

The masculine Mexican charro became the stereotype. The charro hat (known as sombrero in the anglosphere) worn by revolutionary leader Emiliano Zapata in his famous portrait (see Figure 4.11) became an iconic symbol of Mexico. The government used the charro as a national symbol, and the participation of the National Charro Association in the Mexican Revolution commemorative parades legitimised the charro suit as the representative attire of *lo mexicano*. For Pick (2010), the cinema played a fundamental role in disseminating these stereotypes as it had a wider audience and could reach middle-class viewers



Figure 4.11. Portrait of Emiliano Zapata, a Revolutionary leader, wearing a charro hat that became a symbol of the revolution (Colección Gustavo Casasola).

According to Gaytán (2017, pp. 68-69), the *comedia ranchera* genre proved to be popular, and the actors and actresses became national celebrities. For instance, Pedro Infante and Jorge Negrete often sang *ranchera* songs accompanied by mariachi bands in films like *¡Ay Jalisco no te rajes!* (Oh Jalisco, don't back down!) (1949), or *Los Tres García* (The Three Garcías) (1946). Many songs featured tequila in the lyrics and themes, like in *Vamos a echarnos la otra* (Let's drink another one) (1952). The Golden Age of Mexican Cinema, along with its themes, actors, and songs, pushed the image and popularity of tequila as the national drink and the charro suit as the national costume, becoming essentialised attributes of Mexican identity.

In a period known as The Mexican Miracle, President Miguel Alemán accelerated Mexico's progress with foreign investment and modern motorways, and the magazine *Mexico This Month* appeared in 1955 as Mexico's English voice. The magazine promoted Mexico in the US, aiming to establish better relationships between both nations. It attempted to counter the prevailing distrust towards Mexico and the US-American press that portrayed Mexico as 'morally decrepit, politically unstable and economically and racially backward' (Lindsay, 2019, p. 96). The

magazine showcased Mexico featuring colonial cities, beaches, museums, and archaeological sites, with general advice for tourists. *Mexico This Month* ‘contributed directly to the effort to collect and disseminate knowledge about the country’s vernacular traditions and cast them as part of a coherent whole’ (López, 2010, p. 103). The magazine also showcased the works of Mexican artists like Diego Rivera, Leonora Carrington, José Clemente Orozco, and Francisco Goitia. Artist Vladimir Machados created maps of places like Mexico City and Acapulco with symbolic and attractive Mexican motifs included in the magazine (Lindsay, 2019, p. 102). *Mexico This Month* helped change the image of Mexico from a conflictive place to a good welcoming neighbour.

The combination of ancient and modern was very persuasive in the visual narrative of the tourism industry, and they promoted Mexico as a destination that combined both. On the one hand, the mestizo characteristics represented traditional Mexico with images of green fields, valleys, agave landscapes, cacti, snowed volcanoes, and colourful markets, romanticising its exoticism and highlighting people’s hospitality (Vaughan and Lewis, 2006, p. 5). On the other hand, images of modern Mexico ‘consistently compared the capital to other well-known US-American and European cities such as New York, London, or Paris’ and included ‘fashionable, cosmopolitan women to personify modernity in an effort to make the capital desirable and familiar to tourists’ (Berger, 2006a; Lindsay, 2019, p. 101). In the following decades, Mexico’s tourism promotion remained relatively unchanged.

The essence of *indigenismo* and *lo mexicano* remained deep-rooted in Mexican culture. The self-perception of mestizo Mexicans as the heirs of a glorious ancient world and the value for all things indigenous persisted. For most of the 20th century, the Mexican authorities focused on developing seaside tourism and archaeological sites as the main attractions. Mexico presented a 3D immersive experience dedicated to Michoacán’s traditional Day of the Dead celebration exalting its indigenous origins at Expo 2000 in Hanover, Germany (Hellier-Tinoco, 2011, p. 25), along with simulator tours of virtual reconstructions of archaeological sites. The contradictory discourse of embracing indigenous cultures, developing and capitalising archaeological sites, and feeding fantasies of a past glory while indigenous people were ignored and marginalised prevailed.

The 21st century brought the beginning of political alternation in Mexico and a switch in self-perception and self-representation. The rise of a right-wing catholic political party to power pushed for valorising the Spanish elements that shaped Mexico’s identity (Velázquez, 2013, p. 69) and glorifying Mexico’s colonial past. This switch resulted in developing programmes like the Magical Towns programme that initially helped develop towns with strong colonial heritage as tourist attractions and created Mexico’s current country brand. In 2003, the recently created

Council for Tourism Promotion (CPTM) (formed in 1999) concluded that most of the promotion contained stereotypes, archaeological sites and seaside destinations and that the country's brand was very geometric, with sharp angles and indigenous motifs. As a result, they created a new country brand that represented the country's diversity (see Figure 4.12). The redesigned brand was fresh and versatile for tourism promotion, business and formal events.



Figure 4.12. Old and current Mexico's country brand.

The agency Design Associates, which later became MBLM, created the new brand to integrate the country's regions and sectors and to communicate modern Mexico, representing its cultural, productive, and commercial values (Echeverri *et al.*, 2013). The brand takes the country's name, narrating its history and diversity. It goes from the pre-Columbian past, through the Spanish rule, the mix of both worlds, and to contemporary Mexico with modern architecture, nature, and beautiful beaches. Each letter represents something different: The letter M represents the millenary pre-Columbian civilisations with its pyramid-like shape and figures; the letter E represents the Spanish colonial heritage with the curvy pattern and the characteristic accent mark; the letter X represents the fusion of both cultures as a collision of the letter's symmetrical shape, with the sun and the moon aligned; the letter I represents the verticality of monumental architecture and the modernity of tall skyscrapers; the letter C represents the vitality of natural resources, the diversity of flora and fauna; and the letter O represents the striking beaches, the sea, the sky and the natural beauty (MBLM, n.d.) See Figure 4.13 for reference.



Figure 4.13. Mexico's country brand meaning (MBLM, n.d.).

The new country brand materialised in 2004 and was launched at the annual *Tianguis Turístico*, Mexico's Travel Mart, in 2005. The first slogan associated with the brand was 'Mexico, unique, diverse, and welcoming'. Unique for its traditions and costumes, diverse for its tourist attractions, and welcoming for its people's warmth. Its initial brand ambassadors were celebrities from the arts, sports, sciences, and business (MBLM, n.d.). Using the brand at the *Tianguis Turístico* and using celebrities as brand ambassadors would later become a common practice in Mexico's branding. The country's new brand soon earned recognition and positioned the country internationally.

A major step towards improving Mexico's image was taken during President Felipe Calderón's presidency. His War on Drugs increased violence in Mexico, affecting the country's image. Despite government efforts to clarify that violence was concentrated in areas where drug cartels operated (mainly border states), the news coverage, along with US government travel warnings, reduced the number of visitors (Díaz and Pérez, 2012, p. 170; Echeverri *et al.*, 2013, pp. 1127-1128). During 2010, and framed by the independence's bicentenary celebrations, his government positioned the *Vive Mexico* campaign to promote tourism and improve Mexico's image. He also designated 2011 as the National Year of Tourism by signing the National Agreement for Tourism. Different media outlets and private companies joined the effort to improve the country's image, accelerate the development of tourist infrastructure, increase promotion, and ease credit and loan access to businesses in the sector (Echeverri *et al.*, 2013, p. 1131). Its purpose was not only to promote tourism but to promote the country's brand and improve its image and reputation to make Mexico one of the favourite countries to do business with and one of the most visited countries in the world (Díaz and Pérez, 2012, p. 173).

Although Mexico maintains its country brand today, the current government adopted different promotional structures. President Andrés Manuel López Obrador dissolved the Council for Tourism Promotion (CPTM) and created the new Council for Tourism Diplomacy to promote tourism. His government promotes tourism through the Secretariat of Tourism and VisitMexico websites. The *Mexico es Cultura* platform by CONACULTA gathers all the cultural events, information about World Heritage and archaeological sites in one place. *Museo Digital* offers multimedia resources, 3D reconstructions, AR reproductions of objects, and 360-degree virtual tours of museums (Hiriart, 2012). The digital magazine *Mexico Desconocido* promotes Mexico's tourism through articles and multimedia content like the Magical Towns app, which gathers information, photos, and videos of the towns in the programme. Tour operators, hotels, restaurants, and service providers can join the app and provide potential and current visitors with information. Additionally, social media allows tourism research, pushes digital promotional campaigns, generates more interactivity in the virtual world, increases the cultural promotion

of destinations, involves the local people, and creates social engagement using hashtags (Solórzano, 2019, pp. 60-61). These platforms result from a collaborative effort between the government and the private sector.

4.4 Mexico's Country Image and Reputation

Mexico's image has been recorded since the first European explorers arrived on its land, and today, it is highly dependent on media representations and tourism. Spanish conquistadors documented their explorations of the new world and their encounters with Indigenous Americans in their journals and books, creating one of the earliest world's accepted images that foreigners had of that land (Panosso and Trigo, 2015, p. 4). Today, equally curious tourists visit Mexico searching for that image formed in their collective minds. Mexico's image has not always been positive.

Mexico has suffered from a long-standing negative image in the US-American press. They portrayed Mexicans as 'retrograde, both culturally and racially, by virtue of their "mongrelized" mestizo image' (Anderson, 1998, p. 27) and violent, barbaric, hedonistic, and dishonest with an inclination for theft (Lindsay, 2019, p. 25). During the Mexican-American War and through the Mexican Revolution, this prevailed. US-American soldiers revelled in the country, seeing how people lived south of the border, and they wrote everything they saw in their journals (Boardman, 2010), often sharing bad experiences with tequila. During the Mexican Revolution, US-American newspapers positioned tequila as a central aspect of the war, again highlighting Mexicans 'barbaric nature' (Anderson, 2000). Iconic revolutionary figures, like Pancho Villa, became a symbol of the revolution (see Figure 4.14) and were depicted as aggressive bandits who drank tequila and smoked marijuana all the time (Marez, 2004; Gaytán, 2014; Gaytán, 2017, p. 71). The Mexican Revolution imagery persisted over time, reflected in films like *Viva Villa!* (1934) and *Viva Zapata!* (1952) that portrayed the lives of both revolutionary leaders (Villa and Zapata) (see Figure 4.15) (Pick, 2010, p. 74).



Figure 4.14. Pictures of Pancho Villa (1911), a northern revolutionary leader and his guerrilla groups (ca. 1910-1915) were quickly spread in the US (Bain Collection, Library of Congress).



Figure 4.15. American films portrayed revolutionary leaders Pancho Villa and Emiliano Zapata. Pictures of scenes from *Viva Villa!* (Copr. by Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM), 1934) and *Viva Zapata!* (Copr. by Twentieth Century Fox, 1952).

According to Velázquez (2013), the changes in law and infrastructure that the US was experiencing led to international tourism growth in Mexico. The confluence of three major events contributed to a natural flow of US-American tourists into Mexico. The Eighteenth Amendment that prohibited alcohol in the US in 1920, the improvements in the motorway infrastructure that created a US-American national motorway system, and the mass use of new transportation methods such as personal vehicles and aeroplanes allowed organic growth for Mexico's tourism. As a result, US-Americans began to travel beyond their borders to cities like Tijuana in search of products, such as alcohol, that were unavailable in their country (Lindsay, 2019, p. 23). This led to growth in the hospitality industry in border towns.

The increasing number of US-American visitors in Mexican border towns created many bars, cantinas, and brothels. Cities like Tijuana, Ciudad Juárez, and Nuevo Laredo became the heart of Mexico's nightlife. They soon became smelly, dirty and with nothing culturally or architecturally attractive (Berger, 2006a, pp. 61-62). Cantinas, adobe houses, red tiles, cacti, sarapes, and sombreros found in said border towns became common symbols associated with Mexico. Between 1921 and 1928, 75 US-American films presented the Mexican border as dangerous

and without law (Velázquez, 2008; Velázquez, 2013, p. 66). That imagery that US-Americans developed of Mexicans as lazy, drunken men trafficking illegal items contrasted with the nationalist ideal that post-revolutionary governments were fostering of Mexico as the mix of two cultures.

Publications, magazines, and advertising in and outside the country promoted Mexico's art, culture, and tourism. The Mexican government created its first tourism commission to promote a better image of Mexico abroad (Ettinger, 2018, p. 253). The early tourism industry presented a positive image of Mexico in magazines and publications, showing the country recovering from the revolution and gaining political stability. Some of these publications included Howard Phillips' *Mexican Life: Mexico's Monthly Review* (1924), the English brochure of Mexico's Department of Tourism of 1929, the 1930s William Furlong's newsletter, several publications of the Mexican Tourism Association (AMT) and other publications such as *Mexican World: Voice of Latin America* (Lindsay, 2019, pp. 6-7). Mexico's leading university, UNAM, created a summer school for foreigners who wanted to learn more about Mexican culture, encouraging the participation of many Mexican intellectuals (Ettinger, 2018, p. 253). At the time, advertising campaigns focused on natural resources as the main attractions, highlighting the natural features and the country's beauty. They were later transformed by intellectual movements, adding themes of indigenous communities and traditions, regional costumes, and folklore (Lindsay, 2019, p. 26).

Mexico's image of a primitive and dangerous place changed after the prohibition. US-American artists, left-wing intellectuals, and journalists began visiting and exploring Mexico (Delpar, 1992, p. 15). They sought to learn more about the Mexican Revolution's social impact and were interested in its indigenous past and present (Gaytán, 2017, p. 71). Mexico was perceived as unaffected by industrialisation and a tranquil place where people were oblivious to tourists experiencing its exoticism. It was described as a place without the violence, shootings, and fights reported in books, and Mexicans were seen as 'peaceful people – a strange mixture of old Aztec life and American ways' (Wechsberg, 1941, p. 4). The bad reputation publicised in the US-American media started to change with an increasing interest in visiting Mexico, considering it a 'safe yet unspoiled destination for travellers' who would 'enjoy its quaintness, natural beauty, and artistic treasures' (Delpar, 1992, p. 58).

In 1936 the first section of the Pan American highway opened as a long-term project to connect all countries in the Americas from Alaska to Tierra del Fuego (see Figure 4.16). The highway changed Mexico drastically, increasing international tourist arrivals (Saldaña, 2014, p. 110). US citizens started taking road trips beyond their southern border through the section that runs from Laredo to Mexico City and then continuing their journey driving to Acapulco.

Due to the increasing number of US-Americans visiting Mexico, the Mexican authorities removed the passport requirement, contributing to the country's image as a holiday destination (Delpar, 1992), with places like Guadalajara and Tequila as must-sees (Foster, 1941; Gaytán, 2017, p. 72).

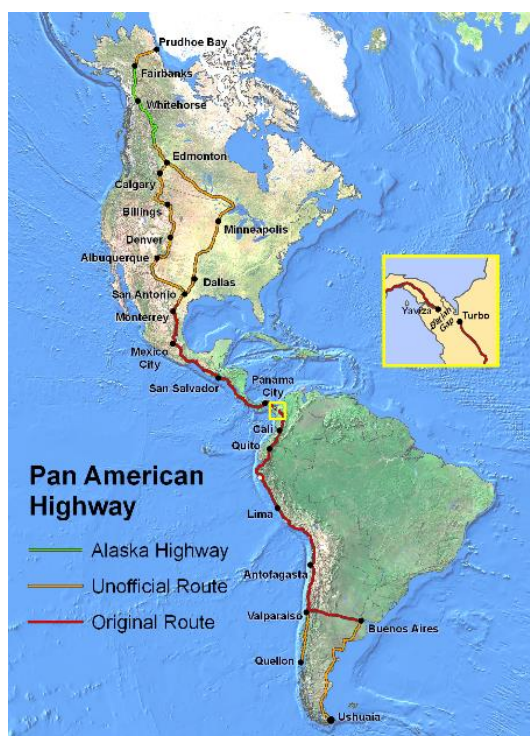


Figure 4.16. The Pan American Highway connected the Americas from Alaska to Argentina (by Seawegee, PD).

The promotion of road trips into Mexico and the rise of more affordable vehicles led US-Americans to develop a whole road trip culture. According to Ettinger (2018), the Mexican section of the Pan American highway developed petrol stations, hotels, repair garages, and many curio shops selling Mexican handicrafts and restaurants offering Mexican and US-American food. The architecture of these facilities and the villages along the motorway changed from neo-colonial styles that flourished in the 1920s (mostly with baroque motifs) to fabricated architecture closer to images of typical Mexican small towns, roughly equivalent to Old Town San Diego. This type of fake rural Mexican architecture was closely related to Spanish regional themes and California's Mission Revival style, with ambiguous references to Mexico and Spain on whitewashed adobe, thick masonry walls, red tile roofs, iron grilles and rounded arches. Postcards in the US, the PEMEX Travel Club Bulletin, and the Mexican Association for Travel Agents spread pictures of said buildings promoting tourism, feeding a tourist gaze of what was considered 'authentic Mexico' (Ibáñez and Cabrera, 2011, p. 51).

While the Mexican border provided undesirable misrepresentations of Mexico, and intellectuals focused on the country's arts and culture, Acapulco emerged as a luxury resort for US-

American and upper-class European travellers. In the 1940s, Acapulco became a popular destination and a top relaxing retreat among Hollywood celebrities (Oehmichen Bazán, 2013, p. 18). It welcomed movie stars in luxurious hotels, resorts, and modern homes, building a unique and alternative image to that of Tijuana and other border towns. For US-Americans, the palm trees and sand fed Mexico's image of being a virgin region to explore, contrasting with the modernity, safety, and comfort of resorts. Acapulco soon became a common filming location for Hollywood as it was not dangerous but exotic, tropical, sensual and paradisiac (Velázquez, 2013, pp. 67-68). It remained as such for the next decades, being Elvis Presley's *Fun in Acapulco* (1963) a good example, in which he appears singing and dancing with a mariachi band (see Figure 4.17).



Figure 4.17. Acapulco became a common holiday spot for celebrities and a film set for Hollywood. Scene from *Fun in Acapulco* (Copr. by Wallis-Hazen, 1963).

Mexico's image and reputation improved during WWII with the Good Neighbour policy. US President Franklin Delano Roosevelt announced the policy in 1933 and created the Office of Inter-American Affairs to promote travel in the region (Ettinger, 2018, p. 252). The Good Neighbour policy served as a propagandist tool to win Latin America's sympathy for the Allies while simultaneously promoting a positive image of Latin America in the US (Panosso and Trigo, 2015, p. 12). Mexico was rebuilding itself after the physical and spiritual destruction of the revolution's violent conflicts from 1910 to 1920 and a religious rebellion from 1926 to 1929 (Berger, 2006a, p. 11). Mexico was also experiencing the nationalisation of its oil industry, which promoted renewed confidence and national pride. For the first time, WWII represented a common war goal between the US and Mexico, and the US distributed a series of posters

portraying both countries as good friends (see Figure 4.18) (Berger, 2010, p. 116). WWII provided a unique opportunity to improve relations between Mexico and the US.

In 1940 President Roosevelt declared the year of inter-American travel, and Mexico prioritised expanding and improving its infrastructure (Ettinger, 2018, p. 253). By improving relationships between the US and Mexico during WWII and by improving infrastructure such as the Pan American Highway, the Southern Pacific of Mexico Railway, and the Mexican National Railways, travelling to Mexico became much more comfortable and affordable for the US middle class (Gaytán, 2017, p. 72). The war and propaganda helped Mexico receive many US-American tourists who could not travel elsewhere but south of the border. Tourism promotion and representation shifted to selling Mexico ‘as the embodiment of both modernity and antiquity’ (Berger, 2006a, p. 56).

The film industry played a crucial role in the Good Neighbour Policy, producing and distributing films with propagandistic aims. An example is Disney’s *The Three Caballeros* (1944), a story of three bird characters, Donald Duck, José Carioca, and Panchito Pistoles, representing the US, Brazil, and Mexico as best friends (see Figure 4.19). By the end of WWII, the reputation and representations of Mexico changed rapidly. Mexico became a faraway land nearby, and films like *Holiday in Mexico* (1946), and *Mexican Hayride* (1948), showed Mexico City’s glamorous nightlife and exotic places to visit (see Figure 4.20). The former promoted a glamorous Mexico by showcasing theatres, markets, fashionable venues, and nightlife, allowing Mexico City to play its role as a cosmopolitan, international, and cultural capital city, presenting Mexico as a modern place with luxury and comfort (Berger, 2006a, p. 113). In the latter, the main character is mistaken as an ambassador of goodwill and taken to several places in Mexico City and Taxco, meeting the locals at street parties, showing a friendlier and less formal face of the country (Berger, 2006b, pp. 13-14).

While US-American soldiers went to war, Mexican braceros became the workforce at farms in the US, encouraging great cultural exchanges. The bracero programme resulted from the US-Mexican Farm Labour Agreement that permitted temporary Mexican workers in the US during WWII. Braceros brought their traditions and customs with them, along with goods and foods that were unavailable in the US. Such products were inexpensive for a time when European shipments of spirits and similar goods ceased due to the global conflict. US-American consumers started looking at Mexican food and drink, creating a more significant demand and the tequila’s first boom in the US with unexpected increases in sales and distribution (Gaytán, 2017, p. 73). José Cuervo and other tequila brands began advertising in US magazines and newspapers.



Figure 4.18. WWII propaganda distributed by the US Office of War Information aimed to encourage a friendship between Mexico and the US, who for the first time had a common war goal (by León Helguera 1943).

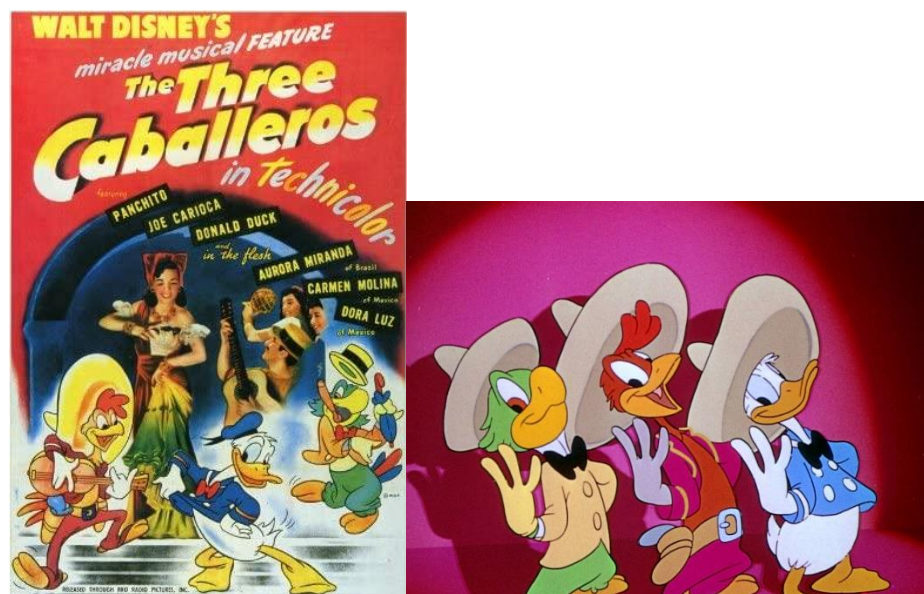


Figure 4.19. *The Three Caballeros* was a classic Disney film that portrayed the US, Mexico, and Brazil as close friends intended to raise awareness about Mexico and South American countries following the Good Neighbour Policy (Copr. by Walt Disney Productions, 1944).

Lindsay (2019, p. 56) points out that two magazines were highly influential in constructing the Mexican image and the tourist gaze, *Mexican Folkways* and *Mexico This Month*. *Mexican Folkways* was the first magazine of its kind in Mexico, published in Spanish and English. It was a platform for disseminating art, popular culture, folklore, and indigenous history. Frances Toor, a US-American anthropologist, was the founder of the magazine. *Mexico This Month* was an enterprise-run magazine distributed to schools and libraries in the US. The magazine was

also distributed in other countries via the Mexican embassies and consulates, reaching readers in Europe and Asia. Anita Brenner, a Jewish Mexican writer and anthropologist, founded the magazine. Both magazines were more than simple guides to Mexico and archives of the country's traditions, culture, and folklore; they worked as catalogues offering different experiences and new forms of consuming culture. Soon, Maya and Mexica (Aztec) imagery and motifs became fashionable in foreign countries that considered Mexican handicrafts trendy.



Figure 4.20. Mexico was presented as an exotic, funny, and glamorous place in films like *Mexican Hayride* (Copr. by Universal International Pictures, 1948) and *Holiday in Mexico* (Copr. by Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM), 1946).

During the 1950s, Mexico experienced rapid growth and capitalist development in a period known as the Mexican Miracle. Mexico evolved from a mostly agricultural country to an urban-based one with significant investments in different industries (Lindsay, 2019, p. 24), becoming less foreign to US-Americans and the world thanks to music. In 1958 the one-word song *Tequila* by The Champs made it to the Billboard charts implanting the drink's name in the anglosphere's collective mind. Ritchie Valens' version of the Mexican folk song *La Bamba* helped reduce Mexico's perceived foreignness. By the 1970s and 1980s, name-dropping songs like Shelly West's *Jose Cuervo* reflected the tequila industry growth, giving a friendlier image with lyrics

that reflected ‘the life of the party’ and ‘drinking too much tequila last night’. In 1971 the frozen margarita machine was introduced in Texas (Gaytán, 2017, p. 73) along with the growth of Tex-Mex food restaurants, which encouraged the proliferation of ‘Mexican atmospheres’.

Mexico’s image was also stereotyped at international sports events. Mexico hosted the 1970 and 1986 FIFA World Cups with two stereotypical mascots (see Figure 4.21). In 1970 Juanito represented Mexico as a chubby mestizo child with a common Spanish name and wearing a giant hat. In 1986 the mascot was Pique, a jalapeño pepper with a black handlebar moustache and hat. His name was derived from the Spanish word *picante*, meaning spicy.



Figure 4.21. Juanito and Pique, FIFA World Cup’s mascots, encouraged Mexican stereotypes in 1970 and 1986, respectively.

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, Mexico’s representation was dominated by films like Robert Rodriguez’s Mexico Trilogy. Rodriguez’s trilogy consisted of *El Mariachi* (1992), *Desperado* (1995), and *Once upon a time in Mexico* (2003) (see Figure 4.22). He empowered the representation of Mexicans on-screen as heroes in a genre that resulted from mixing elements of Westerns, narco-films, and Mexican revolutionary films (Espinoza, 2014). Rodriguez pushed for portraying Mexican heroes in Mexico, unlike other filmmakers who tended to set the action in Texas or California (Ricketts, 2014). Nevertheless, stereotypes persisted. Mexico was portrayed as a poor, dirty place with cantinas, gun violence, and drunken men using resources such as sepia filters, often associated with warm or arid climates. Being of Mexican descent, and born and raised in Texas, his representation of Mexico remained biased by following the cinema industry’s standards.



Figure 4.22. Films like Robert Rodriguez's Mexico Trilogy were common in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Poster of the films *El Mariachi* (Copr. by Columbia Pictures and Los Hooligans Productions, 1992), *Desperado* (Copr. by Columbia Pictures and Los Hooligans Productions, 1995), and *Once upon a time in Mexico* (Copr. by Columbia Pictures, Dimension Films, and Troublemaker Studios, 2003).

Mexico's image abroad began to deteriorate again with the War on Drugs. The increase in drug-related violence, drug trafficking, and illegal immigration raised concerns in US-American society that started looking at Mexico suspiciously again (Velázquez, 2008). The rise of far-right President Donald Trump promoted hate speech towards Mexico, and once again, Mexico was regarded as a dangerous place where people are criminals and not trustworthy. In his presidential campaign, Trump said about Mexicans: '...they're sending people that have a lot of problems, and they're bringing those problems with us, they're bringing drugs, they're bringing crime, they're rapists, and some, I assume, are good people'. His hate campaign against Mexicans and the constant promise of building a border wall to stop illegal immigration and drugs awakened a very poor impression of Mexico among US-Americans, but Mexicans gained the sympathy of the rest of the world. Moreover, narco-themed thrillers such as *Narcos Mexico*

(2018), *El Chapo* (2017), and *Queen of the South* (2016) fostered an interest in and a glorification of drug lords, strengthening Mexico's bad image of being a violent and dangerous country (see Figure 4.23).



Figure 4.23. Modern narco series glorify drug lords and create interest in Mexico's War on Drugs. They depict the country as a violent place with no law. Posters of the series *El Chapo* (Copr by Gaumont International Television and Univision Studios, 2017), *Narcos: Mexico* (Copr. by Gaumont International Television, 2018), and *Queen of the South* (Copr. by Frequency Films and Friendly Films (II), 2016).

British people encounter Mexican culture through the US. The physical and cultural distance between Mexico and the UK makes it difficult for the British to form an opinion about Mexico. They enjoy what they consider Mexican culture, filled with Americanised piñatas, stereotypical hats, *Cinco de Mayo* parties, and fast-food chains that serve Tex-Mex food labelled as Mexican or Mexican-inspired, contributing to misrepresentation of Mexican cuisine. Mexico is rarely represented in the British media. The BBC children's show *Numbertime* included a segment that later became a series called *El Nombre* (2001) that heavily relied on Mexican stereotypes and vague Western and Spanish imagery. In 2008 Top Gear presenters James May, Richard

Hammond, and Jeremy Clarkson made racist and xenophobic comments about Mexicans. The BBC excused them, saying mocking national stereotypes was part of British humour. However, *Cinco de Mayo* is not a holiday or a big celebration in Mexico (only commemorated in the city of Puebla), Tex-Mex food is more Tex than Mex (not commonly eaten in most of the country), and 'El Nombre' means 'the name' in Spanish, not 'the number' as the show intended. A lack of clarification, refutation, and demonstration of authentic Mexican culture contributes to ignorance and the perpetuation of stereotypes.

Mexico's image and reputation have changed over time. Even though elements such as charro hats, mariachi, tequila, masked wrestlers, and spicy food are often stereotyped, they can be positively promoted as part of Mexican culture. They have been part of Mexico's identity and have become an essentialised representation of Mexican culture. Mexican authorities themselves have encouraged the promotion of this stereotypical imagery. However, most of the negative image has been often spread by US-American representations of Mexico in films and television shows. Although Mexico has tried to step out of that shadow for many years, it has not been able to show itself to the world.

4.5 Mexican heritage in cultural tourism

The origin of (cultural) tourism is the Grand Tour. It was common for European elites, particularly in England, to travel to learn about history and art, visiting the principal cultural centres in Europe (Black, 1985). It was not until after WWII that people began visiting the seaside to rest, associating it with a healthy lifestyle and developing whole travel industries (Middleton and Lickorish, 2007). Although one could argue that all tourism is cultural in principle as it involves movement and interactions outside the tourists' cultural context, there has been specific commercialisation of cultural experiences for tourism. Festivities like the Rio Carnival in Brazil or the Oktoberfest in Germany and tours of iconic buildings like the Eiffel Tower in Paris, the Statue of Liberty in New York, and the Chichen Itza ancient city in Mexico have become tourist attractions (Velázquez, 2013, p. 61). The United Nations World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO) defines cultural tourism as:

...a type of tourism activity in which the visitor's essential motivation is to learn, discover, experience and consume the tangible and intangible cultural attractions/products in a tourism destination. These attractions/products relate to a set of distinctive material, intellectual, spiritual and emotional features of a society that encompasses arts and architecture, historical and cultural heritage, culinary heritage, literature, music, creative industries and the living cultures with their lifestyles, value systems, beliefs and traditions (UNWTO, 2017a, p. 15).

With an increase in the demand for more unique and exotic experiences in tourism (Telfer and Sharpley, 2016) and the sophistication of online booking systems that provide innumerable options (Ramjaun and Greenwood, 2020), cultural tourism is becoming increasingly competitive. According to González and Castañeda (2014, pp. 87-89), when a place becomes a destination, it naturally highlights its heritage and characteristics that make it unique in the process of individualisation. It happens when a destination strives to differentiate itself from other destinations. The cultural heritage of the Global South has become a tourism product for the Global North (Flores and Nava, 2016, p. 11) and capitalising on cultural heritage has long been a common practice by the Mexican institutions that protect it, promote it, and differentiate itself from other countries. Folklore is often used in tourism, presenting the endemic culture of a destination to make it ethnically attractive. For instance, the notion of ‘authentically Mexican’ has been crucial in Mexican tourist configurations. State-run tourism organisations such as tourist boards are usually involved in promoting folk culture by organising festivals, competitions, and promoting destinations.

Dance and music play a key role in constructing exoticism and foreignness at destinations (Hellier-Tinoco, 2011, p. 36). Elements like dance and music play different roles in the tourism experience. They can serve as living exhibitions of the culture, presented in museum displays, or even in re-enactments of traditional practices in entertainment shows. For instance, Mexican authorities organise festivals such as Guelaguetza. These events aim to promote and preserve traditions, especially those related to music and dance (Goertzen, 2010). Communicating traditional values and customs contributes to the individualisation of Mexico as a destination, attracting international attention and generating economic and social impact (Solórzano, 2019, p. 49). However, as Flores and Nava (2016, p. 12) pointed out, rural, indigenous, and Afro-descendant communities where many of those traditions originated are generally marginalised and have limited access to these resources and events. They often become actors in a cultural simulation, a show that plays every day in situ, showing visitors what they expect to see (González and Castañeda, 2014, p. 100). In that sense, cultural destinations are sometimes created on-demand as scenic products.

Mexico’s Day of the Dead celebrations is a great example. On the 2nd of November, Mexicans celebrate the return of deceased relatives by paying tribute with a series of festivities, including traditional music, food, and a mix of indigenous and Catholic rituals. This celebration has been portrayed in films like Disney’s *Coco* and James Bond’s *Spectre*, with both negative and positive effects. *Coco*, for instance, attracted many tourists to places like Pátzcuaro and Janitzio in the state of Michoacán, where their Day of the Dead celebrations inspired the film (see Figure 4.24). Since these places cannot accommodate mass tourism, the influx of tourists

soon became invasive. In *Spectre*, James Bond participates in Mexico City's Day of the Dead parade, but parades have never been part of the tradition. The film attracted visitors from more than 67 countries to Mexico City, wanting to see the parade. The situation forced Mexico City's government to recreate *Spectre*'s parade, giving a modern twist to the traditional celebrations to meet visitors' expectations (see Figure 4.25). The parade successfully disseminated information about Mexican culture, traditions, and the Day of the Dead (Solórzano, 2019, p. 48).



Figure 4.24. Disney's film *Coco* portrayed Mexican traditions and Day of the Dead celebrations (Copr. by Walt Disney Pictures and Pixar Animation Studios, 2017).



Figure 4.25. James Bond's *Spectre* film forced Mexico City's government to recreate a fictional parade (Copr. by Eon Productions, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Studios and Columbia Pictures, 2015). The left column shows scenes from *Spectre*, and the right column shows photographs of the newly made annual parade.

Mexico began considering capitalising more on cultural tourism in the 2000s. Under President Vicente Fox's administration, the Centre for Higher Education in Tourism (CESTUR) published a report on cultural tourism's strategic viability. A primary objective of this initiative was to plan future strategies and develop public policies to diversify cultural tourism (SECTUR, n.d.-a). On 9 July 2001, the Mexican government established an interdepartmental strategic alliance between the Secretariat of Tourism and other government dependencies as part of the National Development Plan 2001-2006. It established a collaboration agreement with the National Council for Culture and Arts (CONACULTA), the National Institute of Anthropology and History (INAH), the National Institute of Fine Arts (INBA), the National Fund for Tourism Development (FONATUR), and the Council for Tourism Promotion (CPTM). The intention was to work together in cultural tourism (Ávila, 2007, pp. 17-18).

The cultural tourism viability report divided the country into four regions (see Figure 4.26) (SECTUR, n.d.-a). The southeast region is rich in archaeological sites, indigenous cultures, and natural beauty, and this area receives most of the international tourists. The central region is where Mexico City is located, and it has good weather and a lot of pre-Columbian, colonial, and contemporary heritage. The west region is known as 'the colonial heart of Mexico' due to its vast colonial heritage, being an important area during Spanish rule. This region is home to destinations like Guadalajara, Tlaquepaque and Tequila in the state of Jalisco. The north region has experienced significant industrial and economic development. It is in this region where border tourism occurs, and it has less and more dispersed tangible and intangible heritage (Ávila, 2007, p. 21; SECTUR, n.d.-a, p. 5). With these regions in mind, SECTUR implemented different regional programmes such as *En el Corazón de México* (In the heart of Mexico), *Mundo Maya* (Maya World), *Ruta de los Dioses* (Trail of the Gods) and *Tesoros Coloniales del Centro de México* (Colonial Treasures of Central Mexico) (Ávila, 2007, p. 27).

Mexico's top tourist region is Mundo Maya. Mundo Maya is a multinational effort that involves the Mexican states of Campeche, Quintana Roo, Tabasco, and Yucatán in partnership with the Central American countries of Belize, Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador, where the Maya culture flourished. They work together through their respective tourism authorities under the Mundo Maya Organisation (Ávila, 2007, pp. 29-30). Mundo Maya offers beach resorts, archaeological sites, museums, shopping centres, theme parks, scuba diving, cruise ships, and business and convention facilities. Destinations like Cancún, Isla Mujeres, Tulum, Cozumel, and Playa del Carmen are in this region. Cancún, built for international tourists, is a fusion of US-American, Mexican, and Maya cultures. In Cancún, there are luxurious hotels in the shape of Maya pyramids, fake Maya glyphs used as decoration, international fast-food restaurants, and shopping centres in a whole artificial cultural landscape designed for mass

consumption (Torres and Momsen, 2006). It remains the primary hotspot for European tourists in Mexico, and it is experiencing unprecedented growth with promising projects like the Maya Train and Tulum's airport under development.



Figure 4.26. Map of Mexico divided into Cultural Tourism regions. Adapted from (SECTUR, n.d.-a).

Mexico is a country with a rich and diverse heritage. Mexico has 35 sites inscribed on UNESCO's World Heritage list throughout its territory, making it the 7th country with the most World Heritage sites. There are 27 cultural sites, six natural sites, and two mixed sites (UNESCO, n.d.-b). Additionally, there are 11 cultural expressions on the Intangible Cultural Heritage list, including traditional Mexican cuisine, *charrería* equestrian tradition, mariachi music, and the Day of the Dead indigenous festivity (UNESCO, n.d.-a). Mexico's heritage sites and intangible cultural heritage elements are a part of the country's uniqueness, which makes it attractive to foreign visitors.

The country's cultural tourism covers a wide range of attractions. Mexico has 193 archaeological sites that are open to the public, displaying the huge cultural diversity of indigenous cultures. There are also 1439 museums, 132 Magical Towns, 920 galleries, 654 festivals, 1254 local festivities, and eight UNESCO Creative Cities, to name a few (SIC, 2022). Among the festivals that attract tourists, three stand out: Cumbre Tajin, which fuses Veracruz's folklore (such as the famous Papantla flying men) with modern artistic activities; La Guelaguetza, which showcases Oaxaca's folklore; and the International Cervantine Festival, which presents opera, music, dance, theatre, street art, film and literature from around the world. In particular, the latter has gained international recognition and had Queen Elizabeth II and Prince Philip, Duke of Edinburgh, as special guests on one occasion. Other cultural attractions include themed road trip trails at consolidated and emerging tourist destinations. Famous trails include the Tequila

Trail in Jalisco and the Cheese and Wine Trail in Queretaro. Mexico's wide cultural tourism industry results from the combined efforts of many stakeholders and the government.

For Osorio-García and Novo (2020), the success of Mexico's diversification of tourism focuses on developing three main alternatives to the enclave model of the Integrally Planned Centres: the Cultural Heritage cities, the Magical Towns programme, and ecotourism initiatives. The Cultural Heritage Cities and the Magical Towns programme particularly promote cultural tourism. Mexico has ten colonial cities inscribed on UNESCO's World Heritage List as historic city centres and monument zones. The Cultural Heritage Cities formed the National Association of Mexican World Heritage Cities to manage resources, ensure heritage preservation policies, and promote tourism in the cities (ANCMPPM, n.d.). The Magical Towns programme brings together 132 small towns with distinguishing attributes such as indigenous or colonial architecture, historical relevance, natural beauty, and traditional features representing the notion of 'authentic Mexico'. Although the programme initially funded public infrastructure and heritage conservation projects to incentivise cultural tourism in the towns, today, it is only an umbrella brand or designation to attract tourism. They function as both standalone destinations and complements of more prominent destinations.

However, no place can escape globalisation, and destinations tend to lose their authenticity very quickly. Today's globalised world dictates how destinations are refurbished and reorganised to meet visitors' needs and expectations, making destinations products made of local heritage inputs that outsiders consume. This leads to significant changes in destinations' economy, image, and infrastructure, contributing to a Disneyfication of destinations. Jalisco's Lake Chapala and Ajijic, for instance, attract many international visitors and new residents every year, as it has become a retirement hotspot for US-American and Canadian retirees who have changed Florida for a place with more authenticity, like the British choosing the Mediterranean as their retirement home (Truly, 2006; Croucher, 2021). Similarly, San Miguel de Allende is seen as an unspoiled gem with colonial architecture and mariachi bands playing on the street. Outside the town centre, however, shopping centres and modern facilities abound (Bloom, 2006; Covert, 2017). This phenomenon creates new agglomeration diseconomies and gentrification processes, in which the historical centres of small traditional Mexican towns and cities become tourist attractions changing their configuration and their economic, social, and cultural contexts (Oehmichen Bazán, 2013, p. 18; Hiernaux-Nicolas and González Gómez, 2015).

In addition, capitalising on cultural tourism to the extreme can result in caricaturing the local culture. In 1999, many tour operators and resorts offered 'Maya Millennium' packages to welcome the new millennium in the mysticism of Maya rituals by visiting places like Chichen Itza and Uxmal (Evans, 2004, p. 323). The celebration included a New Year's Eve ritual performed

by a fake Maya high priest, followed by gourmet dinners and shows. However, there are no New Year celebrations in the Maya culture. Similarly, the idea of a Maya prophecy that predicted the end of the world in 2012 encouraged a global interest in Maya culture, but it was, in reality, nothing more than the end of one of the many cycles in one of the Maya calendars (Ely, 2013, p. 84). However, the Mexican government took advantage by creating the Mundo Maya 2012 campaign using the slogan ‘The countdown that will make history... A new era begins’ as a gimmick to transform the prophecy’s interest into an opportunity to boost tourism in Mundo Maya. The government ran it without considering the Maya people’s opinions (Godoy, 2012).

For Evans (2004), the ownership and interpretation of heritage should not be assumed or imposed from the outside. Universalist heritage and tourists’ ‘right’ to access monuments and sites are imperialist and colonial concepts. In Mundo Maya, for instance, there is a serious lack of genuine community involvement in heritage management and interpretation. National authorities, the private sector, and power groups are heavily involved in developing these places, using conservation as an excuse for their intervention. In addition, international tourism polarises destinations. The geographical configuration of Cancún, for instance, contrasts the opulence of the modern and luxurious Hotel Zone with the miserable working-class conditions in which many immigrants and indigenous people live in the city centre, producing uneven development and inequality (Torres and Momsen, 2006). This situation generates xenophilia that makes international tourists look like benefactors with exclusive spaces which most locals cannot access unless they work there. Consequently, residents of international tourist destinations like Cancún often experience racism and discrimination (Castellanos and París, 2001; Oehmichen Bazán, 2013, p. 17).

Commercialising and capitalising on Mexican cultural heritage in an industry like tourism should be debated further. If tourism is managed correctly and responsibly, it becomes relevant for the protection and promotion of cultural heritage (Zegarra, 2015, p. 74; Solórzano, 2019, p. 47), as encounters between tourists and locals start a process of gradual cultural interchange and understanding (González and Castañeda, 2014, p. 101). In addition, it generates revenue that can contribute to the management and conservation of both tangible and intangible cultural heritage. Using Mexico’s cultural heritage for tourism also influences the tourist gaze and constructs its country’s image. Tourists construct images and memories through their experiences, sharing pictures and videos with family and friends that further reinforce their perception and expectations of a destination (Urry and Larsen, 2011; González and Castañeda, 2014, pp. 100-101). Thus, the country can promote its cultural heritage through tourism to make tourists associate Mexico with it, opposing negative representations commonly seen in the media, such as drug-related violence.

4.6 The Magical Towns programme

Mexico's Magical Towns programme aims to diversify tourism by developing small and medium-sized communities as tourist destinations. The programme was created in 2001 by Mexico's Secretariat of Tourism, which describes it as a 'comprehensive tourism development programme for localities that, at a different level of development, organise different economic, social and environmental actions to improve the living conditions of a tourist town' (SECTUR, 2014, p. 63). It is a cultural alternative to Mexico's popular seaside Integrally Planned Centres. It groups small towns and villages with specific characteristics preserved over time, making them attractive and worthwhile to visit. By developing tourism products related to local arts, crafts, gastronomy, traditions, and festivals, the programme encourages them to value their tangible and intangible heritage. Moreover, it offers the opportunity to develop complementing activities related to ecotourism, such as fishing, horse-riding, and extreme sports, to name a few (Winiarczyk-Raźniak and Raźniak, 2021, p. 6). According to the Secretariat of Tourism, '(...) the Magical Towns programme has sought to take advantage of the country's natural and/or cultural assets, increase employment, as well as promote public and private investment to improve the population's well-being' (SECTUR, 2017a, p. 3).

The Magical Towns programme has evolved into a long-term tourist diversification strategy in Mexico over the past 21 years. In that period, four different administrations have adjusted it to the needs and context of their time, changing its regulations, application process and requirements. The programme's general objective today is to 'promote sustainable development of towns that possess unique characteristics and authenticity by valuing their attractiveness with a brand of exclusivity and prestige' (SECTUR, 2017a, p. 3). The programme incorporates 132 towns with distinctive attributes, such as indigenous or colonial architecture, historical significance, natural beauty, and traditional features that are intrinsically 'Mexican'. Although the programme initially funded public infrastructure and heritage conservation projects to boost cultural tourism in the towns, today, it is only used as a branded designation for the towns to help them attract tourists.

It is important to note that several similar programmes were developed in Europe and Asia before Mexico's Magical Towns programme. In 1982, *Les Plus Beaux Villages de France* (The most beautiful villages of France) was created, followed by Wallonia (1994), Quebec (1997), Italy (2001), Japan (2005), Germany (2010), Spain (2011), Russia (2014), Switzerland (2015), Lebanon (2016), and China (2019). They all work as independent civil associations in their respective countries. In 2012, they created an international cooperation project named the International Federation of *Les Plus Beaux Villages de la Terre* (translated as The Most Beautiful

Villages of the World) (LPBVT, 2022). Even though these initiatives have no official connection with the Mexican Magical Towns programme, it could be assumed that Mexico followed the late 1990s and early 2000s trend by adapting its own programme from a governmental standpoint. A similar trend is taking place in the Spanish-speaking world, replicating Mexico's successful programme and forming an early Magical Towns of the World Association (see section 4.6.6).

4.6.1 History and evolution of the Magical Towns programme

The earliest Mexican precedents to the Magical Towns programme are in the 1970s and 1990s. From 1969 to 1975, the State of Mexico implemented an Integral Town Remodel Programme to improve basic infrastructure and services such as electricity, water, street lighting, refurbishing façades, and public spaces. Said programme improved living conditions in small towns, reduced migration to big cities, and unintentionally boosted local tourism (Madrid, 2014, p. 198). Between 1993 and 1996, the Secretariat of Tourism's Colonial Cities and Urban Centres programme published a manual and delivered workshops on urban image topics. The workshops addressed issues related to tangible heritage preservation and urban image improvement. Participants included community members, academics, local authorities, public infrastructure directors, tourism sector representatives, chambers of commerce, and civil associations (SECTUR, 1997, p. 7). Furthermore, in 1996, President Ernesto Zedillo established a Tourism Sector Development Programme (SECTUR, 1996a) prioritising the tourism policy. The programme suggested diversifying tourism by promoting regions where nature, history, and culture are primary attractions (SECTUR, 1996b). The Magical Towns programme naturally evolved from those infrastructure, heritage preservation, urban image, and tourism policies (SECTUR, n.d.-b, p. 3).

President Vicente Fox established a National Tourism Programme from 2001 to 2006 (SECTUR, 2002a). Among the main issues noted was the concentration of most international tourism in a small number of destinations targeted at a specific market. The offer and demand were focused on a single market dominated by the US, consisting of seaside destinations. In response, President Fox's national tourism development programme proposed a strategy similar to President Zedillo's, focusing on two main actions: consolidation and diversification (SECTUR, 2002b). The former aimed to improve popular destinations, and the latter offered alternative tourism products (Madrid, 2014, p. 201). The Magical Towns programme was mentioned for the first time in this strategy as a way to support and boost small towns with the potential to become tourist destinations with mixed funding from the federal, state, and

municipal governments, as well as the private sector (SECTUR, 2001, p. 168). The initial eligibility criteria comprised: proximity to bigger tourist sites, road accessibility, historical or religious value, and will to join the programme (SECTUR, n.d.-b, p. 3). Under President Fox's administration, 27 towns benefited from this programme, paving the way for its expansion in future administrations.

Under President Felipe Calderon's administration (2006-2012), the Magical Towns programme's tourism policy remained similar, but the number of towns in the programme significantly increased (see Figure 4.27). During his administration, 56 new towns were appointed (SECTUR, 2017b). He granted 35 new designations in his last year as president, 24 of which were appointed during his last two months and nine on his last day. Having accelerated the process in such an unusual way raised suspicion over the possible use of the programme for political purposes or as an electoral instrument, which could have undermined the programme's intended goals (Madrid, 2014, p. 277). It could be argued that this behaviour reduces the quality of the programme and the value of the Magical Towns brand. Unsurprisingly, many of these towns could not meet the visitors' expectations, and the government had a more limited budget for the project.

The programme needed a restructuring after running for 13 consecutive years. Under President Enrique Peña Nieto's administration (2012 to 2018), the Secretariat of Tourism revisited the Magical Towns programme to identify its weaknesses, challenges, and opportunities. As a result, the Official Gazette published the 'agreement that establishes general guidelines for inclusion and permanence in the Magical Towns Programme' on 26 September 2014 (SECTUR, 2014). The agreement established rules, regulations, and procedures that helped the programme mature with a more transparent and standardised application process. However, despite the criticism regarding the number of towns listed in the programme, 38 new towns were appointed (SECTUR, 2017b), and 10 of them obtained their designation in President Peña's last two months in office (SECTUR, 2018b). The situation again led to accusations of using the programme for political purposes.

With a new government led by President Andrés Manuel López Obrador taking office in December 2018, rumours of radical changes to or cancellation of the programme were strong. While President López Obrador made controversial changes to the tourism strategy, the programme did not disappear. Significant changes included dissolving the Council for Tourism Promotion (CPTM), leaving it to the Secretariat of Tourism to coordinate local events (López, 2019, p. 11), and creating the Council for Tourism Diplomacy within the Secretariat of Foreign Affairs to oversee international promotion (López, 2019, p. 79). The Magical Towns programme ceased funding for the listed towns and transformed into a branding programme

whereby towns earn their inclusion and right to use the brand by improving their urban image, living conditions, and tourism infrastructure. The changes aimed to redirect tourism budgets to larger projects, like the highly criticised Maya Train (SECTUR, 2019e). The train will stop at several locations in the Yucatán Peninsula, including some Magical Towns and Mundo Maya destinations, to boost regional tourism. Despite the government's announcement that there would be no new appointments in the programme, 11 new towns were appointed in 2020 by the Secretariat of Tourism (SECTUR, 2020a).

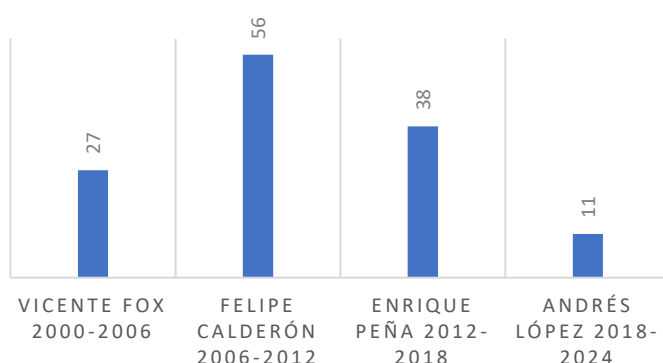


Figure 4.27. Number of Magical Towns designations by administration

Today, the Magical Towns programme is a matured, consolidated, and well-positioned programme in Mexico. The programme is particularly relevant to the Secretariat of Tourism since it is its only nationwide programme and involves collaboration with other government departments (Winiarczyk-Raźniak and Raźniak, 2021, p. 5). As of 2022, it integrates 132 towns (see Table 4.2), covering all 31 states but Mexico City (see Figure 4.28). The Secretariat of Tourism signed a cooperation agreement with the Secretariats of Social Development, Education, Labour and Social Welfare, Economy, and Environment and Natural Resources. Additionally, it has partnered with the National Fund for Development of Arts and Crafts, the National Council for Culture and Arts, the Federal Electricity Commission, the National Water Commission, and the National Institute of Anthropology and History (SECTUR, 2014). The programme has also firmly positioned its brand across the country. The Mexican Institute of Intellectual Property recognised the Magical Towns brand as a famous brand in 2017, as 9 out of 10 Mexicans know the brand (Puga, 2017). Becoming a Magical Town has become a communal goal for many rural towns as it provides an opportunity for economic growth and improvements to living conditions (Winiarczyk-Raźniak and Raźniak, 2021, p. 14).

List of Magical Towns			
2001	Huamantla	Lagos de Moreno	San Pablo Villa de Mitla
Huasca de Ocampo	Jerez de García Salinas	Metepec	San Pedro y San Pablo Teposcolula
Real de Catorce	2009	Mineral de Angangueo	Atlixco
2002	El Fuerte	Tacámbaro	Huauchinango
Comala	2010	Jiquilpan	San Joaquín
Dolores Hidalgo	Malinalco	Tzintzuntzan	Isla Mujeres
Taxco	Santa Clara del Cobre	Jala	Tulum
Tapalpa	Jalpan de Serra	Pahuatlán	Mocorito
Tepotztlán	Tapijulapa	Chignahuapan	Tlaxco
Pátzcuaro	2011	Cholula	Orizaba
Tepoztlán	Palizada	Tlatlauquitepec	Zozocolco
Cuetzalan del Progreso	Mineral del Chico	Xicotepec	Coscomatepec
Izamal	San Sebastián del Oeste	Tequisquiapan	2018
2003	El Oro	El Rosario	Tlaquepaque
San Cristóbal de las Casas	Tlayacapan	Magdalena de Kino	Comonfort
Tequila	Zacatlán	Papantla	Melchor Muzquiz
2004	Cadereyta de Montes	Valladolid	Guadalupe
Parras de la Fuente	Xilitla	Sombrerete	Compostela
Real del Monte	Tula	Pinos	Zimapan
2005	Xico	Nochistlán	Nombre de Dios
Mazamitla	Teúl de González Ortega	2015	Amealco de Bonfil
Valle de Bravo	2012	San José de Gracia	Aquismón
Tlalpujahua	Calvillo	Candela	Bustamante
San Sebastián Bernal	Tecate	Guerrero	2020
Cosalá	Loreto	Palenque	Isla Aguada
Álamos	Cuatrociénegas	Casas Grandes	Zempoala
2006	Arteaga	Tecoautla	Ajijic
Real de Asientos	Viesca	Mascota	Tonatico
Todos Santos	Comitán de Domínguez	Talpa de Allende	Paracho
Cuitzeo	Chiapa de Corzo	Aculco	Mexcaltitán
Santiago	Batopilas	Ixtapan de la Sal	Santa Catarina Juquila
Bacalar	Mapimí	San Juan Teotihuacán y San Martín de las Pirámides	Tetela de Ocampo
Coatepec	Mineral de Pozos	Villa del Carbón	Santa María del Río
2007	Jalpa	Sayulita	Maní
Creel	Salvatierra	Linares	Sisal
Capulámpam de Méndez	Yuriria	Huautla de Jiménez	
Mier	Huichapan	Mazunte	

Table 4.2. List of Magical Towns by year (SECTUR, 2017b; SECTUR, 2018b; SECTUR, 2020a).



Figure 4.28. Map of Mexico with the 132 Magical Towns pinpointed (by unknown, CC BY 3.0).

4.6.2 Becoming a Magical Town

The concept of a ‘Magical Town’ is somewhat ambiguous. The Secretariat of Tourism defines a Magical Town as ‘a town that through time and in the face of modernity has preserved, valued and defended its historical, cultural and natural heritage, and manifests it in various expressions through its tangible and intangible heritage. A Magical Town is a locality with unique symbolic attributes, authentic stories, transcendental events, everyday life, which means a great opportunity for utilising it in tourism, attending to the travellers’ motivations and needs’ (SECTUR, 2017a, p. 4). This definition, however, is very romantic, unclear, and full of broad terms like ‘symbolic attributes’, ‘authentic stories’ and ‘everyday life’ that could have many interpretations. What is ‘magical’ to some, for instance, is not to others. Because of this lack of clarity, local administrations use any asset for tourism, regardless of relevance, often causing abuse, such as embezzlement and corruption (Winiarczyk-Raźniak and Raźniak, 2021, p. 7). For García and Méndez (2018a, p. 166), the so-called ‘magic’ of these towns is perhaps what UNESCO defines as intangible heritage, traditions, rituals, festivities, gastronomy, and music, which the Secretariat of Tourism has called ‘symbolic attributes’ and ‘everyday life’.

Visibly, however, most towns’ magic lies in their tangible heritage as Hispanic settlements. Towns in New Spain followed the Spanish *Leyes de Indias* (Laws of the Indies) compiled in the *Recopilación de Leyes de Los Reinos de Indias* (1681) (Compilation of Laws of the Kingdoms of the Indies). The compilation included the *Ordenanzas de descubrimiento, nueva población y pacificación de las Indias* (1573) (Ordinances for the discovery, new population, and the pacification of the Indies) derived from Hernán Cortés’ *Ordenanzas municipales e Instrucciones* (1525) (Municipal Ordinances and Instructions). These contained the regulations for establishing grid plan towns where a main square (*Plaza de Armas* or *Plaza Mayor*) was the centrepiece surrounded by the political, religious, and economic powers represented by the government palace, the church, and the civil buildings of the elites (García and Méndez, 2018a, p. 168). However, the Magical Towns programme has emphasised so much in improving the urban image, painting façades, and constructing neo-colonial buildings that have trivialised the towns’ heritage. It has created homogenous urban landscapes under a generic, idealised notion of *lo colonial*, what is truly ‘colonial’, with mixed elements of *lo mexicano* (García and Méndez, 2018b, p. 27; García and Méndez, 2018a, p. 164).

Although the direct translation of *Pueblo Mágico* is Magical Town, it is important to look deeper into the name to disambiguate the term. A *pueblo* is a town, a village, or a small rural community. However, the word *pueblo* can also refer to the people who live in a town or village. A *pueblo* is a group of people who share a common history, traditions, beliefs, values, language,

and other cultural traits. The Spanish word *pueblo* should not be confused with the English word *pueblo*, which, while borrowed from Spanish, is exclusively used to refer to ancient towns and villages built by Indigenous American peoples in the US Southwest (see Kantner, 2004). Also, it is important to highlight that there is a common mistranslation of the programme's name, often incorrectly referred to as 'Magic Towns'. While in English, the adjective *magic* refers to something supernatural or with special powers, and *magical* denotes something with unique qualities, the Spanish word *mágico* has both meanings. In the case of the term *Pueblo Mágico*, it means the latter, referring to a unique, quaint, idyllic, charming, or picturesque town. This thesis deliberately uses the English form to avoid ambiguity and promote the programme's internationalisation.

In that sense, there is a clear distinction between a Magical Town and a non-magical one. A Magical Town differs from any other Mexican town in that most Mexican towns are modern, relatively newly built, and victims of overpopulation, poverty, bad urban design, disorganisation, and chaos characteristic of developing nations, with little to no attractiveness for cultural tourism. The Magical Towns, on the contrary, preserve their colonial or indigenous architecture, their essence as a community, and aesthetic beauty that resembles notions of 'authentic Mexico'. They represent the ideal of a small, harmonious, conservative, and traditional community, away from the chaos of big cities and the rushed lifestyles of many developed societies (Alvarado *et al.*, 2016, pp. 8-9). A Magical Town, then, evokes the collective imagery of 'traditional Mexico' and, in many instances, the nostalgia of colonial Mexico as a 'better' country, often giving the word colonial a positive connotation.

A town must follow a two-stage process to be part of the Magical Towns programme. The process was reviewed and changed in 2020, resulting in the publication of the National Strategy for Magical Towns (SECTUR, 2020d). It follows the usual bottom-up approach that the programme has maintained for 21 years, contrasting with the popular Integrally Planned Centres (see Chapter 4). When developing an Integrally Planned Centre, the government decides where the tourist destination should be built, a model that has developed Mexico's tourism industry with seaside destinations. However, the community requests to become a destination in the Magical Towns programme, so they must take the initiative.

In the first stage, a town must apply on the Secretariat of Tourism website following a call for applications. Filling out the application form requires the town's officials to submit a formal request letter signed by the town's mayor. Also, they should submit a legal document crediting the town's mayor and an essay explaining its heritage, attractiveness, uniqueness, and authenticity. The Secretariat of Tourism then evaluates these documents and, if everything is in order, admits the aspiring town to the next stage.

During the second stage, the aspiring town is required to submit further documentation. Local authorities who initiated the application process must provide an inventory of resources and tourist attractions, including a photographic report and a directory of tourist service providers. They also need to submit a municipal tourism plan detailing the town's socio-economic conditions, tourist infrastructure, budget management, quality standards, tourist certification, training and professionalisation of tourist service providers, tourism promotion, private sector participation, tourist safety and security, and including sections related to sustainable tourism, heritage preservation, and inclusion, among others. Furthermore, they need to provide the geographical delimitation of the tourist area that will be considered a Magical Town, a letter from the City Council declaring a commitment to granting construction permits only to properties that harmonise with the local architecture, improving and preserving urban infrastructure, and reorganising semi-fixed and street vendors. Finally, the state authorities must provide a commitment letter stating they will allocate a budget for welfare and sustainable tourism development in the aspiring town.

The application and selection processes have become more straightforward. Under the new 2020 revision, the Secretariat of Tourism eliminated vital parts of the process. They eliminated the physical development evaluation stage, which assessed how well the aspiring town could receive tourists, looking at tourist services such as accommodations, restaurants, car rentals and the tangible and intangible heritage. Additionally, they eliminated evaluations of tourist perception on the web, based on Big Data that looked at 28 KPIs from 22 online sources such as Airbnb, Booking, Google, Instagram, Kayak, TripAdvisor, Trivago, and Twitter. Most importantly, they eliminated an in-situ evaluation of the aspiring town designed to verify its tourism potential and ensure successful implementation. Currently, it is a strictly document-based evaluation, with an ambiguous point system that takes more into account whether towns submitted all the required documents than their tourism potential.

Over time, the requirements for becoming a Magical Town have become more moderate. Initially, they were pretty strict. President Calderon's first revision of 2014 relaxed the requirements due to political considerations, allowing the Secretariat of Tourism to appoint more towns easily. Less rigorous requirements resulted in the appointment of more Magical Towns, which did not meet the criteria of the original programme (Winiarczyk-Raźniak and Raźniak, 2021, p. 8). The new 2020 revision simplifies the process since it assumes that aspiring towns already have all the infrastructure, and because designated towns do not receive any funding, they will receive fewer applications. While a strict evaluation is no longer part of the application process, all towns must now undergo an annual evaluation to remain in the programme.

4.6.3 The Magical Towns brand

The Magical Towns brand consists of a colourful pinwheel and the two Spanish words *Pueblos Mágicos* (see Figure 4.29). The colourful pinwheel represents diversity and movement. It represents the diversity of all the towns and their attractions. Pinwheels, though not Mexican in origin, are associated with traditional Mexico in that they are often sold in the plazas of small Mexican towns. The *Pueblos Mágicos* text accompanying the pinwheel is decorated with a tilde under the vowels a and o. Said tilde is merely ornamental and does not change the vowel's sound. It is a graphic element resembling the unique Spanish letter ñ. The brand, per se, has a strong 'colonial Mexico' aesthetic. It is also a very versatile brand, which can be rearranged vertically or horizontally according to the needs, and towns can adapt the brand by using their names as sub-brands. The guidelines have changed over time regarding the font used for sub-brands. Figure 4.30 presents Tequila as an example of a Magical Towns sub-brand following the original guidelines and Tlaquepaque following the new brand's specifications. Other countries with Magical Towns programmes use similar brands with similar colours and fonts (see section 4.6.6).



Figure 4.29. *Pueblos Mágicos* Programme brand used by the towns inscribed in the programme.



Figure 4.30. Tequila and Tlaquepaque sub-brands follow different guidelines.

Upon joining the Magical Towns programme, a town has the right to use the brand. The brand was awarded the distinction of 'famous brand' by the Mexican Institute of Intellectual Property in 2017 since 9 out of 10 Mexican citizens are familiar with the brand (Puga, 2017). Local tourism authorities, artisans, hotel owners, and independent tour guides, among others,

are entitled to use the Magical Towns brand for their stationery, uniforms, documents, advertising campaigns, and to label their products and crafts. The towns demonstrate that they belong to a select group with similar characteristics by using the brand. Listed towns are also advertised in all Magical Towns campaigns by the Secretariat of Tourism, and they appear on their website and are invited to events such as the Magical Towns Tourist Mart. Additionally, being part of the programme increases the community's self-esteem because it legitimises their history, culture, traditions, and heritage, boosting morale and giving a reason to be proud (Madrid, 2014, pp. 209-210). The Magical Towns brand is highly associated with good cultural destinations, making a place more attractive for visitors and investors.

4.6.4 Promotion on Paid and Owned media

Mexico's tourism promotion is government-led. From 1999 to 2019, the Council for Tourism Promotion (CPTM) prioritised promoting Mexico's Integrally Planned Centres over its cultural tourism programmes. In 2019, President López Obrador dissolved the Council for Tourism Promotion (CPTM), replacing it with a Council for Tourism Diplomacy, a departure from previous administrations' strategies (Osorio-García and Novo, 2020, p. 115; Cabrera, 2022, p. 191). While the Council for Tourism Promotion relied heavily on paid media, the new Council for Tourism Diplomacy emphasises using owned media. Tourism resources primarily focus on the Maya Train, and paid advertising is rare. Their VisitMexico YouTube channel launched a campaign in 2019 promoting the Magical Towns in Spanish with English subtitles, but it was interrupted by the Covid-19 pandemic (see Figure 4.31). They also run two Twitter accounts, @VisitMexico for Spanish and @WeVisitMexico for English content. Despite having more content related to the Magical Towns in the Spanish account, there are some good mentions of the programme in the English one (see Figure 4.32). Both Twitter accounts do not use the Magical Towns brand.

The Secretariat of Tourism partnered with the tourism magazine *Mexico Desconocido* to develop the official Magical Towns website. The platform includes individual information about all the Magical Towns and service providers. They also developed a web app that presents information, photos, and videos of the towns that are part of the programme. Tour operators, hotels, restaurants, and service providers can join the app, where they can provide information to visitors. Potential visitors can plan their itineraries, and current visitors can find real-time information. Although VisitMexico.com includes a section on Magical Towns (see Figure 4.33). It is not as attractive and user-friendly as the one developed by *Mexico Desconocido* (see Figure 4.34).

The Secretariat of Tourism and state governments organise events and festivals to promote the Magical Towns programme. A major event is the Magical Towns Travel Mart, where representatives from all Magical Towns get together to share their cultures and ideas. The Magical Towns Travel Mart has achieved international fame, as it was held for the first time outside of Mexico in 2022 (see section 4.6.6). Moreover, the Mexican government declared 5 October as the National Day of the Magical Towns, which allows the Secretariat of Tourism to hold extra activities once a year (SECTUR, 2020c). Additionally, state governments also organise events. One example is the first Festival of Jalisco's Magical Towns, which gathered Jalisco's nine Magical Towns in 2020. It was similar to the Magical Towns Travel Mart but on a smaller scale. These events provide an excellent platform for cultural showcases, tourism promotion, and learning opportunities.

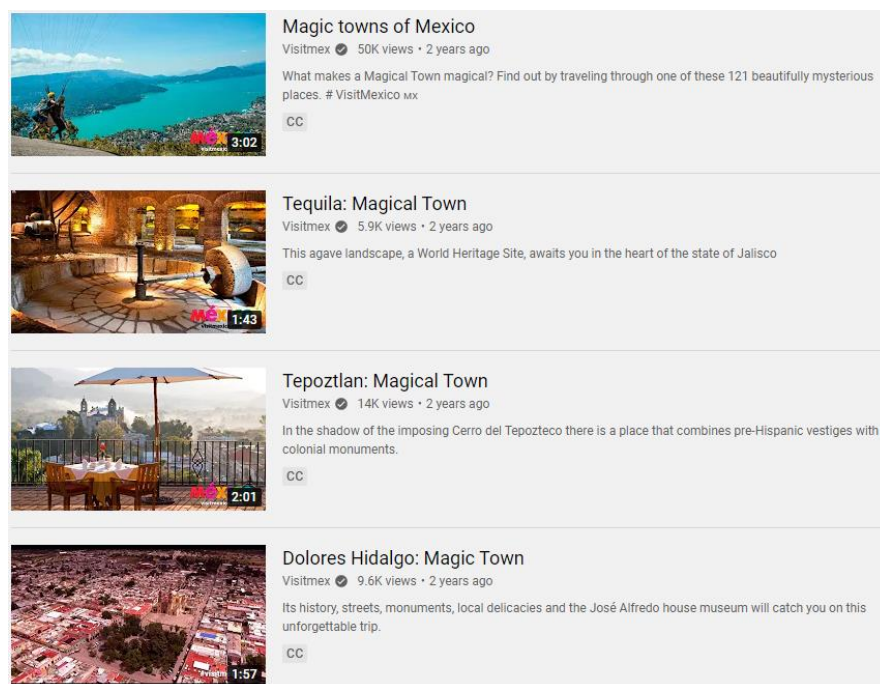


Figure 4.31. VisitMexico 2019 YouTube Magical Towns campaign.

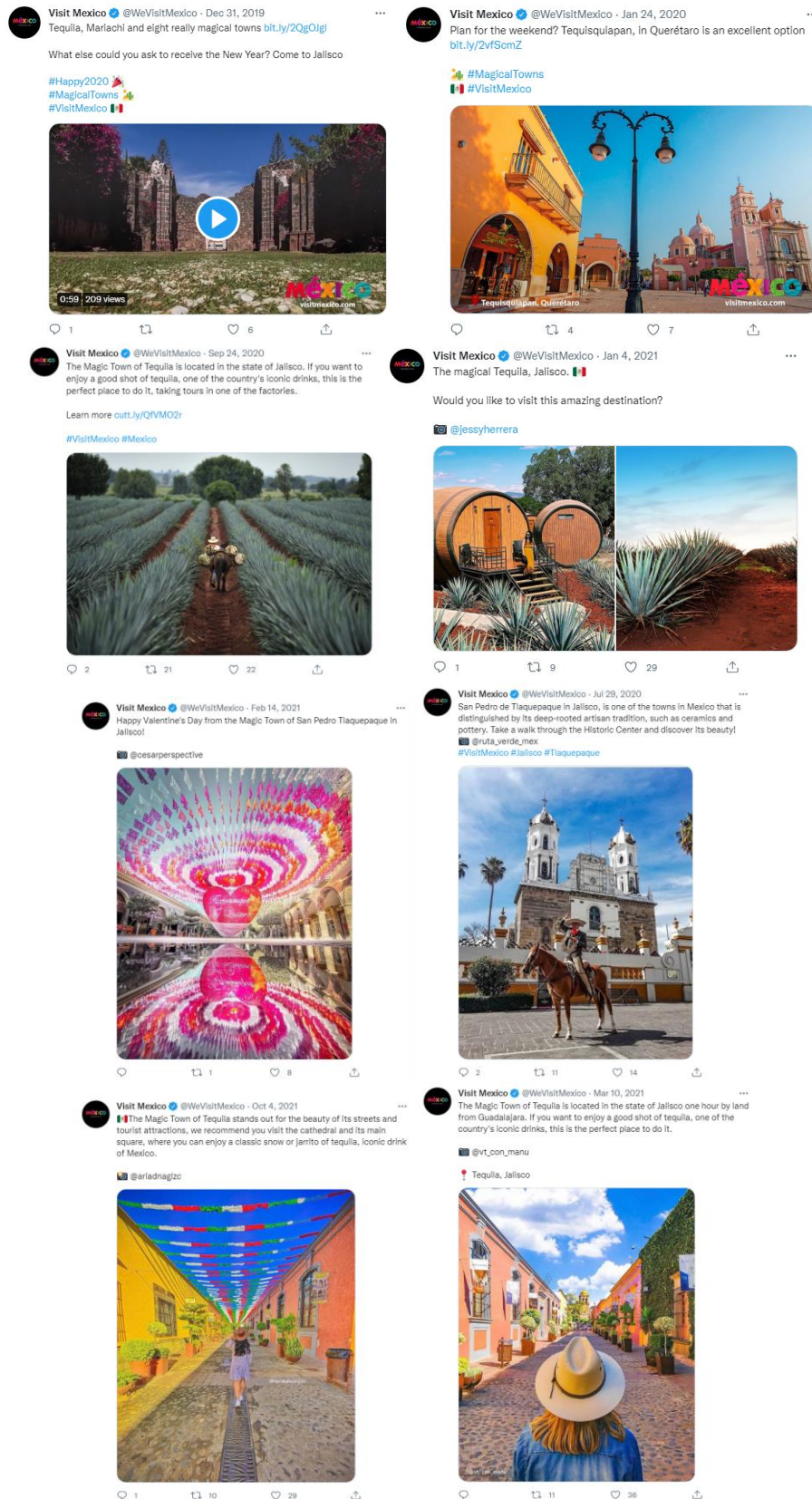


Figure 4.32. Assorted examples of @WeVisitMexico tweets promoting specific towns and using the #Magical Towns.

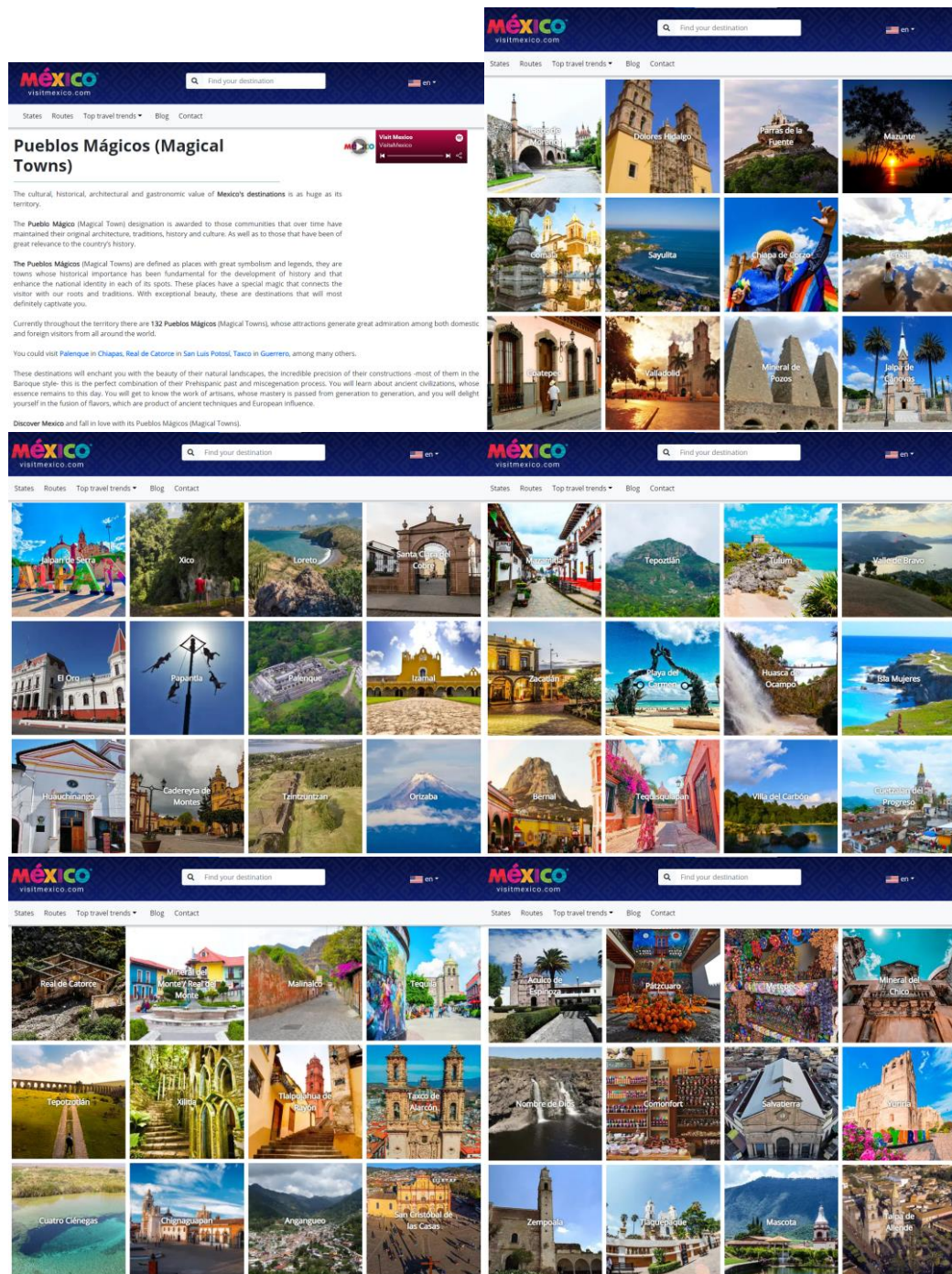


Figure 4.33. Examples of visual material used in the Magical Towns' page in VisitMexico website.

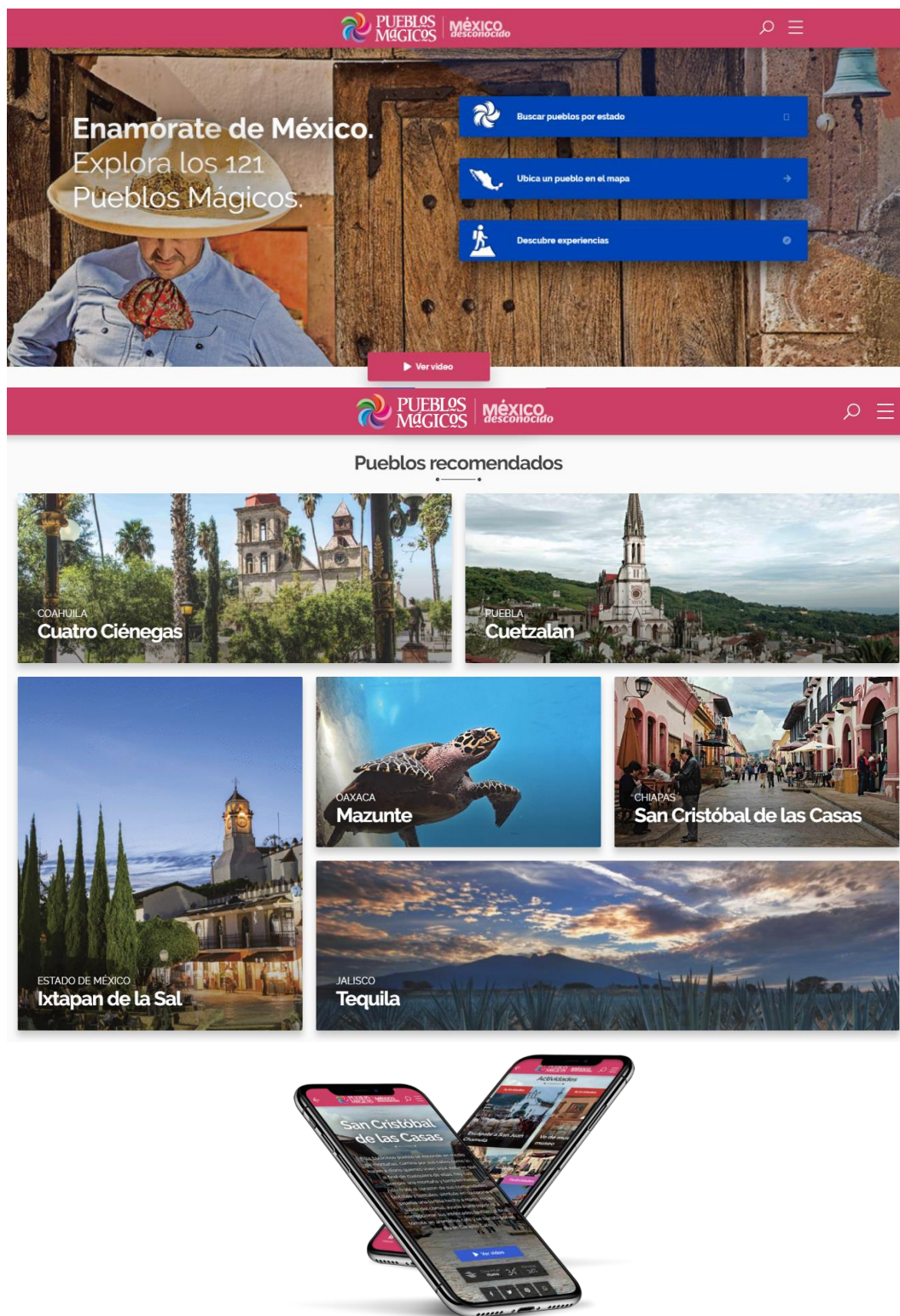


Figure 4.34. Official Magical Towns guide and app developed by Mexico Desconocido.

4.6.5 Promotion on Earned and Shared Media

The Magical Towns programme is often featured in traditional media. Since the Secretariat of Tourism is a principal agency of the Mexican government, stories about events like the Magical Towns Travel Mart hit the headlines. Media outlets such as newspapers, radio, and television, as well as web-based versions of these outlets, would likely cover the story. Additionally, some

towns, such as Tequila, have been chosen as filming locations. The famous Telenovela *Destilando Amor* (Distilling Love) portrayed the town's landscapes and attractions in 2007, while Netflix's 2019 series *Monarca* focused more on the town's industrial side. Although they promoted the town, attracting many visitors locally and internationally, they were not mentioning the Magical Towns programme in any way. Nonetheless, two particular examples explicitly covered the Magical Towns programme. In 2013, Chef Jesús Gibaja travelled across Mexico, filming local recipes in each Magical Town in a show called *La cocina en los Pueblos Mágicos* (Cuisine in the Magical Towns). Furthermore, the film *Destino 111* (2021) tells the story of a young man who travels around the 132 Magical Towns. Its adoption, popularity as a public policy, and two-word name make it easy to reference in traditional media.

Also, social media plays a significant role in promoting the Magical Towns programme. On the one hand, many travel vloggers and YouTube channels document their visits to Magical Towns (see Figure 4.35). Some of them provide tips and tricks for visiting these towns. Although some videos are in English and YouTube provides auto-translated captions, most of the content is in Spanish and is aimed at Spanish-speaking audiences. On the other hand, Instagram and Facebook are very visual social media platforms in which large communities of travel bloggers, photographers, and dedicated fan pages share and re-sharing photographs of the Magical Towns using hashtags such as #PueblosMágicos, #PuebloMágico, and #MagicalTowns.

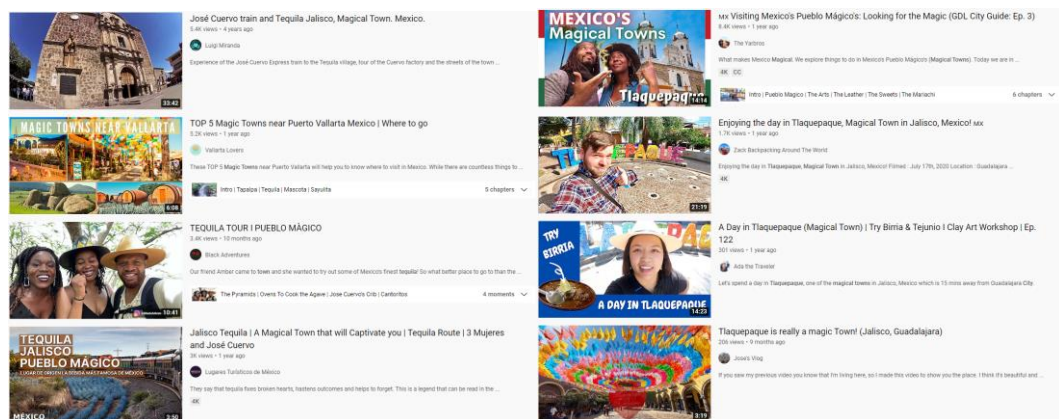


Figure 4.35. Assorted examples of earned media covering Magical Towns on YouTube.

4.6.6 Criticism and international impact

The programme has been criticised for its lack of transparency, corruption accusations, and its use as a political tool. According to Arista *et al.* (2021, p. 200), the programme has been criticised by non-governmental organisations and academics for many reasons, such as the high levels of criminality in some towns, its controversial and negative outcomes in some other towns, its mismanagement of economic resources, and its trivialisation and exploitation of local

heritage. In 2020, the Magical Towns programme underwent a second restructuring due to the new government's anti-corruption initiatives and President López's austerity plan. Budget cuts were one of the changes the new National Strategy for Magical Towns brought, leading the general public to believe its future was uncertain.

The programme was heavily criticised for its lack of transparency in its first thirteen years. Local committees were not required to make their information public and were limited to ten voting members. This situation allowed elitist practices where the heads of the committees (primarily businesspeople) had the power to select who could join the committee (Chavez and Rosales, 2015). Additionally, there was no mechanism to control the budget, exposing the local government's weakness in managing tourist destinations (Madrid, 2014, p. 273). The programme has been taken advantage of to achieve political ends, indicating corruption in its implementation (Madrid and Cerón, 2012). During President Calderón's administration (2007-2012), the number of Magical Town designations doubled (see section 4.6.1), which indicated a clear manipulation of the designations for political purposes (Núñez and Ettinger, 2020, p. 44). Thus, the ability to decide and designate a town as a Magical Town provided the powerless Secretariat of Tourism with an instrument for the political capitalisation of the initiative (Madrid, 2014, p. 215).

Other issues raised include the programme's inequality and the number of towns that are included in it. Some towns have higher tourism potential than others, while some have been tourist destinations long before becoming a Magical Town (Chavez and Rosales, 2015). That results in small towns not getting enough attention, which stops their tourist development and allows them to benefit from the programme in a limited way. Moreover, the inclusion of 132 towns in the programme undermines the reputation and credibility of the brand since it reduces the quality of service and cannot guarantee meeting visitor expectations. There is a risk of losing the brand's exclusivity since the more Magical Towns there are, the less special the designation becomes.

The slight improvement in levels of wealth and living conditions, along with a generalised lack of consideration for real heritage preservation, are among other criticisms. Authors like Winiarczyk-Raźniak and Raźniak (2021), Pérez-Paredes *et al.* (2021), and Núñez and Ettinger (2020) argue that the programme is primarily concerned with developing a delineated 'Magical Town area' for tourists, but neglects the rest of the town. Therefore, the programme does not increase the quality of life. Moreover, the programme tends to adapt to the expectations of tourists in ways that do not necessarily reflect the local heritage, traditions, authenticity, and needs. That can be observed in developing purpose-built tourist buildings designed in neo-colonial architectural styles without considering the towns' past (García and Méndez, 2018a). For

Hernández (2009), the programme is merely cosmetic, as it beautifies and restores the appearance of the towns while it hides the true needs and socio-economic deficits.

Despite the criticism and negative aspects, the programme has gradually improved and is essential to Mexico's tourism diversification strategy. Transparency has been improved since the 2014 restructuring, which clarified the application, selection, and evaluation processes. As part of the new administration's promise, corruption is expected to disappear soon. As a result of the 2020 restructuring, the programme no longer provides funding; instead, it has become a sort of certification badge. That means towns are granted the privilege of being named Magical Towns only if they comply with the standards. As a result, the local tourism sector will be able to attract more private investment.

The Magical Towns programme also impacted on an international level. In 2019, the annual Magical Towns Fair evolved into the Magical Towns Travel Mart, which is a similar concept, in which representatives from all the ascribed towns come together, but with stronger participation of the private sector, allowing companies and tourism service providers to hold business meetings, and networking (SECTUR, 2019c). As part of the internationalisation plans included in the National Strategy of Magical Towns (SECTUR, 2020d), the Secretariat of Tourism hosted a Magical Towns Travel Mart event abroad for the first time (see Figure 4.36). The event took place in Barcelona, Spain, from 22 to 24 April 2022 and was intended to promote Mexico's heritage and locally produced crafts on the international market (SECTUR, 2022). The event allowed the promotion of Mexico's Magical Towns programme and the establishment of commercial relationships between tour operators, hospitality businesses, and artisans. It also provided an opportunity to strengthen ties with the Magical Towns of Spain initiative.

The Magical Towns programme's perceived success has led other Spanish-speaking countries to create their own version of it. Hispanic countries have found an opportunity to diversify their tourism through their rich cultures. Examples of this are Colombia's *Pueblos Patrimonio* (Heritage Towns, since 2010), Argentina's *Pueblos Auténticos* (Authentic Towns, since 2017), Spain's *Pueblos Mágicos de España* (Magical Towns of Spain, since 2018), Guatemala's *Pueblos Pintorescos* (Picturesque Towns, since 2019), Chile's *Pueblos Mágicos de Chile* (Magical Towns of Chile, since 2019), and Ecuador's *Pueblos Mágicos Ecuador* (Magical Towns Ecuador, since 2020). All of them were inspired by the Mexican programme and run by government departments, except for Spain and Chile, which are run by non-governmental organisations. Some of them, such as Spain, Chile, and Ecuador, have a brand that resembles Mexico's (see Figure 4.37). The proliferation of this type of programme in several countries led to international integration ideas, such as a Network of Latin American Towns (MINTUR, 2017) or an already more consolidated Association of Magical Towns of the World (see Figure 4.38), which

is planning to have its headquarters in Granada, Spain, with Mexico as an honorary president due to its pioneer status (PME, 2019).



Figure 4.36. Assorted photographs of the first International Magical Towns Travel Mart held in Barcelona, Spain, in April 2022 (PueblosMagicosEspana, 2022; SECTUR, 2022).



Figure 4.37. Brands of similar programmes in Spain, Ecuador, Chile, Colombia, Argentina, and Guatemala.



Figure 4.38. Brand of the Magical Towns of the World Association.

4.6.7 Researching the Magical Towns programme

Magical Towns research is spread across many different fields, as the programme is not a field in and of itself. A thorough literature search revealed many studies identifying and categorising them into six groups based on their approach. These studies are listed in Table 4.3 under the headings of ‘Operation’, ‘Economy, social changes, and quality of life’, ‘Identity, narratives, and imagery’, ‘Opportunities’, ‘Visitor-based studies’, and ‘Multidisciplinary studies’. Madrid (2019) deserves a special mention as he developed an extensive literature review identifying 160 academic papers related to Magical Towns up to 2015. It was a remarkable contribution since it was one of the first literature reviews with such a level of detail. This section summarises this study’s identified categories and types of found academic papers related to the Magical Towns programme.

The first two categories are ‘Operation’ and ‘Economy, social changes, and quality of life’. The first category, ‘Operation’, groups studies that focus on the operational aspects of the Magical Towns programme, and it groups studies that look at the implementation and flaws of the programme. Alcalá-Flores *et al.* (2021), for instance, examined the perception of residents of Jerez, concluding that they do not perceive the programme has had any significant contribution to the town’s development. Similarly, Núñez and Ettinger (2020) explored the programme’s effectiveness in Patzcuaro, concluding that infrastructure improvements focused on a specific area, neglecting the rest of the town. Muñoz (2019) explored citizens’ participation in the programme. The second category examines how the programme has affected the local economy by generating social changes and affecting the quality of life in impacted towns. For instance, Torres *et al.* (2021) analysed the socio-economic impact of the Magical Towns programme in Pinos, finding very positive results in employment, entrepreneurship, and a boost to the local economy. Similarly, Pérez-Paredes *et al.* (2021) conducted a socio-economic analysis in Chignahuapan but concluded that benefits are seasonal and, therefore, there has not been a real improvement in the quality of life.

The third and fourth identified categories are ‘Identity, narratives, and imagery’ and ‘Opportunities’. ‘Identity, narratives, and imagery’, groups research exploring the symbolic attributes given to the towns in the programme. For instance, Díaz and Osorio (2021) explored how different groups perceived and interacted with the town of Ixtapan de la Sal. They concluded that tourists, businesspeople, local authorities, and residents perceive the town, its attractions, and the Magical Towns programme differently. García and Méndez (2018a) was the only found paper that addressed the Magical Towns brand. They examined the narratives and discourses associated with the concept of a Magical Town and the values attached to the Magical Towns brand, analysing elements such as the pinwheel and font. Moreover, they examined the architecture in different Magical Towns, addressing the romanticisation of colonial Mexico. In the fourth category, ‘Opportunities’, there are a number of studies identifying opportunities for a better future for the towns. Solórzano (2019), for instance, proposed a shift from traditional tourism to creative tourism, where UNESCO’s World Heritage list and Mexico’s Magical Towns designation could help to encourage cultural activities, incentivising creativity for developing novel experiences to diversify tourism.

Finally, the fifth and sixth categories are ‘Visitor-based studies’ and ‘Multidisciplinary studies’. In the fifth category, ‘Visitor-based studies’, research explores visitors’ experiences and perceptions when visiting some of the towns in the programme. For instance, Rosales *et al.* (2019) examined the tourism trends in four towns of the Sierra Norte region in Puebla. They made a profile of the average tourist to identify the trends and opportunities, concluding that they are young people (primarily students) under 30 looking for nature, gastronomy, and crafts. As a result, they identified an opportunity to develop complementary adventure and nature tourism products to add to the already existing offer in said towns. Similarly, Almendarez-Hernández *et al.* (2021) analysed the attributes that influence visitors’ choices in four Magical Towns in Mexico’s northwest. According to the study, visitors would consider Todos Santos as the first option, followed by Cosalá, Loreto, and El Rosario because of the specificities and characteristics of the destinations, identifying opportunities for improving tourism strategies, services, and promotion. In the last category, ‘Multidisciplinary studies’, only a book coordinated by López *et al.* (2015) is listed, which presents 19 papers from different authors in different disciplines, covering different towns in the programme.

Operation	Economy, social changes, and quality of life	Identity, narratives, and imagery
Bolaños <i>et al.</i> (2021) Arista <i>et al.</i> (2021) Alcalá-Flores <i>et al.</i> (2021) Núñez and Ettinger (2020) Muñoz (2019) Esquivel and Fernández (2019) Shaadi and Pulido (2018) Rodríguez <i>et al.</i> (2018) Mejía (2018) López (2018) Hernández <i>et al.</i> (2017) Núñez (2016) Clausen and Gyimóthy (2016) Hernández (2015) Madrid (2014) Warnholtz (2014) Alvarado (2014) Velázquez and Clausen (2012) Rodríguez (2012) Covarrubias <i>et al.</i> (2010) Velarde <i>et al.</i> (2009) Hoyos and Hernández (2008)	Torres <i>et al.</i> (2021) Pérez-Paredes <i>et al.</i> (2021) Morán-Bravo <i>et al.</i> (2021) Mascarúa-Alcázar <i>et al.</i> (2021) González-Herrera <i>et al.</i> (2021) Winiarczyk-Raźniak and Raźniak (2021) Zapata <i>et al.</i> (2021) Segovia <i>et al.</i> (2019) Shaadi and Pulido (2018) Cornejo-Ortega <i>et al.</i> (2018) Saiz-Alvarez (2018) Vizcaino-Suárez <i>et al.</i> (2017) Clausen and Gyimóthy (2016) Treviño <i>et al.</i> (2015) Madrid (2014) Velázquez and Clausen (2012) Hernández (2009) Hoyos and Hernández (2008)	Díaz and Osorio (2021) García and Méndez (2018a) Alvarado <i>et al.</i> (2016) Velázquez (2013) Guillen <i>et al.</i> (2012)
Opportunities	Visitor-based studies	Multidisciplinary studies
Rosales <i>et al.</i> (2019) Jiménez <i>et al.</i> (2018) Cruz and Juárez (2017)	Almendarez-Hernández <i>et al.</i> (2021) Monroy and Urcádiz (2020) López (2017)	López <i>et al.</i> (2015)

Table 4.3. Literature that addresses the Magical Towns programme classified into six identified categories.

The Magical Towns programme is the subject of a surprising number of works covering a wide range of topics and issues in various disciplines, mostly focusing on the programme's operation and economic, social, and political impacts. The Magical Towns programme is unique to each place it is developed; therefore, research conclusions cannot be generalised. Except for García and Méndez (2018a), no other works are related to the Magical Towns brand, its promotion, or its PR and marketing communications aspects. Perhaps this is due to the limited number of promotional activities related to the programme. Since most strategies of the Council for Tourism Promotion were dedicated to promoting Integrally Planned Centres (sea-side destinations) and the Council for Tourism Diplomacy has just recently started promoting the programme mainly on social media, there are not many campaigns promoting tourism to the towns (see section 4.6.4). Therefore, in addition to the literature gap identified in Chapter 3, this study attempts to fill this gap by contributing to research on the Magical Towns programme by bringing a perspective from another study area.

4.7 Conclusion

This chapter examined Mexico as a tourist destination. It discussed Mexican tourism policies, cultural tourism, and Mexico's country identity, branding, image, and reputation. The current Mexican identity comes from a post-revolutionary nationalist discourse. Intellectual movements, such as *indigenismo* and *lo mexicano*, look at Mexico's identity and philosophy of self,

embracing Mexico's Indigenous American and Spanish heritage and incorporating it into a present mestizo identity. Mestizo cultural elements like mariachi music, tequila, and *charrería* became part of what is truly Mexican. However, increasingly popular narco-series on television and streaming services portray stereotypes related to drug violence stemming from the long border that Mexico shares with the US. They present the US interpretation of Mexico and export it to the world.

This chapter provided a context and background knowledge of Mexico's tourism industry. Mexico's tourism is still highly dependent on the government as its main stakeholder, still has the US as a primary targeted market, relies on public and foreign investment, and has Cancún as its leading destination. Prohibition in the US, mass production of cars, the Pan American Highway, the growing aviation industry, WWII, and the Good Neighbour Policy consolidated Mexico's tourism industry and influenced the country's international image. The UK leads the European group of visitors.

Today, Mexico is the most visited country in Latin America and the 7th most visited country in the world (UNWTO, 2021). Mexico has a reliable tourism infrastructure and a mature model for developing state-run seaside destinations. A great part of Mexico's economy is generated by tourism, but the country is still recovering from the closure of non-essential hospitality venues result of the Covid-19 pandemic. Thanks to its diverse landscapes, archaeological sites, historical monuments, and different types of weather, the government has diversified the industry to target different types of tourists.

The Secretariat of Tourism created the Magical Towns programme in 2001 to diversify the tourism industry. The programme groups 132 towns that, due to their tangible and intangible heritage, provide a magical atmosphere attractive for cultural tourism. The so-called 'magic' lies in a rather ambiguous concept but refers to a combination of history, culture, traditions, heritage, atmosphere, and even natural attributes, with the adjective 'magical' meaning 'charming' or 'quaint'. The programme has become an accreditation or certification brand for towns with already developed infrastructure and no longer provides resources. Aspiring towns now need to demonstrate that they meet the criteria of having natural and historical attractions and the capacity and infrastructure to receive large numbers of tourists. The change is intended to reduce corruption and foster interaction between civil society and stakeholders, encouraging private sector investment in the towns' infrastructure. The programme's promotion relies on owned, earned, and shared media, most of which is in Spanish, suggesting there is much work to be done for internationalisation. This study looks into two towns that are part of the programme: Tequila and Tlaquepaque, and how 360-degree video could contribute to promoting them in the UK as cultural destinations.

Chapter 5. Methodology

5.1 Introduction

Chapters 2 to 5 addressed the theoretical background related to the promotion of tourist destinations, VR technology and 360-degree video, the context of Mexico as a tourist destination, and the Magical Towns programme. Among other things, they reviewed some of the literature related to the topic and identified the research gaps which this thesis attempts to fill. The majority of studies exploring VR and 360-degree video have used a quantitative approach with statistical analysis of participants' survey responses. Many of them have analysed existing 360-degree videos and platforms. Furthermore, little research has been conducted on the Magical Towns programme, and no studies regarding its promotion strategies, communication challenges, or stakeholder interaction were found. This study contributes by providing qualitative and practical perspectives, producing, and testing a 360-degree video played on VR HMDs and analysing its potential in promoting the Magical Towns programme.

This chapter discusses the role of qualitative research in marketing communications and PR and outlines this study's methodological framework. This chapter aims to provide a detailed description of the methodology used in this study and how individual semi-structured interviews, online questionnaires, and focus groups were conducted to collect data and explore the use of 360-degree video in promoting destinations that are part of the Magical Towns programme. Moreover, it addresses the limitations and ethical considerations taken before, during, and after the study.

This chapter is divided into eight sections. The first section discusses the role of qualitative research in the fields of marketing communications and PR. Following that, it describes the methods and data collection process giving a brief overview of the three methods: individual semi-structured interviews, online questionnaires, and virtual focus groups. Then, the following section addresses the case study approach and its selection criteria, explaining why Tequila and Tlaquepaque were chosen for this study. Next, this chapter presents a detailed outline of the 360-degree video production process covering the pre-production, production, and post-production stages. Two sections describe how the methods were conducted during the data collection process. One explains the individual semi-structured interviews, and another the online questionnaires and virtual focus groups. The two sections describe the sampling procedure, the participant recruitment process, and the question protocol used for each method. After that, this chapter describes how the data was transcribed, imported, coded, and analysed in NVivo. The

last section addresses the methodological limitations, challenges, and ethical considerations taken during the study.

5.2 Qualitative research in marketing communications and PR research

During the 19th century and early 20th century, social issues became relevant research topics addressed with the methodology and methods used in the natural sciences. Positivism became a prominent model in the social sciences, permeating disciplines like psychology and sociology, and it has been the dominant paradigm in marketing and PR research (Daymon and Holloway, 2011; Dühring, 2017). The interpretivism paradigm, however, emerged after WWII as an attempt to separate the social sciences and humanities from the natural sciences, seeing social issues as socially constructed problems (Dühring, 2017). Although most marketing communications and PR research had followed positivist (and therefore quantitative) methodologies, there has been a ‘qualitative turn’ that has brought a wide variety of methodological choices with interpretive approaches (Prasad, 2005).

Qualitative and quantitative research differ in several ways. Qualitative research studies how groups or individuals make sense of the world and their socially constructed reality. Several context-related factors are considered, including sociocultural characteristics, historical conditions, and the location where the research is being conducted (Daymon and Holloway, 2011). Qualitative research attempts to better understand issues through open-ended methods, such as interviews and focus groups, analysing small samples in specific contexts. This contrasts with quantitative research, which collects data using closed-ended methods with larger samples, such as surveys (Michaelson and Stacks, 2014, p. 95). Qualitative research generally follows an inductive approach instead of testing hypotheses against rigid theoretical frameworks. An open-minded interpretive and reflexive approach is taken, where the findings are contrasted against relevant literature. For Daymon and Holloway (2011, p. 7), qualitative researchers work ‘at the edge of chaos’ since their research has some structure but is flexible enough to obtain unexpected results. Whilst this study does not consider itself ‘at the edge of chaos’ it is nonetheless in line with standard qualitative research in which the researcher interprets the studied subjects’ interpretation of their reality (Smith, 2020, p. 9) and is open to spontaneously exploring new and unanticipated ideas.

Research in marketing communications and PR has evolved on parallel tracks that frequently overlap. While PR knowledge is primarily based on communication, media studies, and management, marketing communications is based on marketing and advertising (Daymon and Holloway, 2011, p. 14). In practice, however, PR frequently uses its techniques to achieve

marketing-related goals, and marketers frequently use media relations and promotional strategies to achieve PR and reputation-related goals. Qualitative research in both areas conducts an interpretive exploration of human, organisational, and societal communication. This exploration tends to be through small samples with results that cannot be generalised to a larger population, but it helps to understand people's behaviour, motivations and preferences (Jugenheimer *et al.*, 2014). Thus, marketing communications and PR research focus on the processes of communicative relationships and interactions between practitioners and members of specific stakeholder groups through different approaches.

Daymon and Holloway (2011, p. 106) identified eight research approaches for marketing communications and PR. Research in this field can: (1) explore the persuasive strategies of managers towards employees; (2) look at the advocacy of activist groups towards elite coalitions; (3) analyse the interactions between stakeholders and corporate communicators seeking to co-construct meaning; (4) look at the hidden voices of silent minorities ignored in political discourses; (5) study the spontaneous decision-making activities of individuals in organisations; (6) examine the creative relationships that consumers hold with brands; (7) analyse the interpersonal negotiations between media relations practitioners and journalists; and/or (8) look at the collaborative engagement between research participants and qualitative investigators when immersed in the field of research. The approach taken for a study depends on the project's aims and objectives.

All eight approaches are partially applicable to this study. Through stakeholders' interviews in two of the Magical Towns, this study explores the persuasive strategies and relationships between public and private organisations (1), and the advocacy of stakeholders in the local committees that sometimes act as activist groups (2). It also explores the interactions and communication between stakeholders in the two Magical Towns seeking to co-construct meaning (3) by giving voice to members of the committees that do not always feel represented and whose voices are often ignored in the programme's decisions (4). This study also explores individuals' decision-making activities and opinions about promotional activities they carry out in their towns (5). It addresses issues related to events, editorial content, electronic material, publications, and media coverage on paid, earned, shared, and owned media (7). Additionally, through the online questionnaire and focus groups, this study examines the relationships that potential visitors hold with Mexico's country brand and the Magical Towns brand (6), and it addresses the collaborative engagement of participants in the interviews and focus groups, who dedicated time to answer questions and engage in the 360-degree video activity (8).

Similarly, Jugenheimer *et al.* (2014, pp. 64-67) identified five qualitative research approaches in the fields of marketing communications and PR research. (a) Source credibility

examines the credibility of the media or a person who sends a message. It deals with how audiences select messages from specific sources due to their credibility and how it influences changing attitudes. (b) Concept testing is usually conducted before introducing new promotional campaigns or products. It usually involves participants being asked to evaluate a PR campaign, ideas, brand names, or to test a product. (c) Copy testing is similar to concept testing but focuses on pretesting a message aimed to be delivered in the media. This is done by evaluating factors like comprehension and relevance of the message. (d) Media trust explores the type of messages that are more likely to be believed, the reasons that such trust exists, and audiences' motivations. (e) Media reliability is very similar to both media trust and source credibility. However, this one focuses not on the messages but on the media outlets, their editorial line, and whether their agenda benefits certain political parties, companies or influential figures.

Those five approaches are also applicable to this study. This study compares photographs with 360-degree video to determine the credibility of promotional materials (a), discusses how trustworthy the messages on promotional material are (d), and whether tourist board websites and travel guides are reliable sources of information (e). This study also tested the concept of using 360-degree video on VR HMDs to promote the magical towns by asking a group of participants to evaluate its effectiveness as a promotional tool (b). During the discussion, participants commented on the 360-degree video's voice-over and its effectiveness as a message (c).

Thus, qualitative research in this field aims to find and interpret the implications of being involved with or affected by marketing communications and PR. Specifically, it examines how practitioners and stakeholders plan and implement communication activities and their relationships with individuals, organisations, communities, and society in their social and historical contexts. In this study, analysing the interaction and communication between stakeholders yields insights into the Magical Towns programme implementation, current promotional strategies, and their willingness to implement new promotional methods. Exploring potential visitors' relationships with Mexico's branding provides an understanding of their level of awareness, preconceptions, and what to include in promotional materials. Testing the 360-degree video as a promotional tool provides information on whether potential visitors would use it and how this could contribute to Mexico's promotion of the Magical Towns programme in the UK. The combination of these qualitative approaches provides a holistic view that helps answering this study's research question by looking at the perspectives of the different groups involved in it. Thanks to the lack of rigidity of qualitative research, this study was able to explore the research topic in a receptive way and adapt to overcome challenges resulting from the impact of Covid-19.

5.3 Methods design and data collection process

This study uses individual semi-structured interviews, online questionnaires, and virtual focus groups as primary data collection methods. Using a case study approach, it examines the realities of people involved in promotional and communication issues in the towns of Tequila and Tlaquepaque in the state of Jalisco, Mexico. Furthermore, it discusses the potential use of 360-degree video to promote said towns in the UK. The case study approach provided two data sets by collecting data from primary sources. The methods design for this study is illustrated in Figure 5.1.

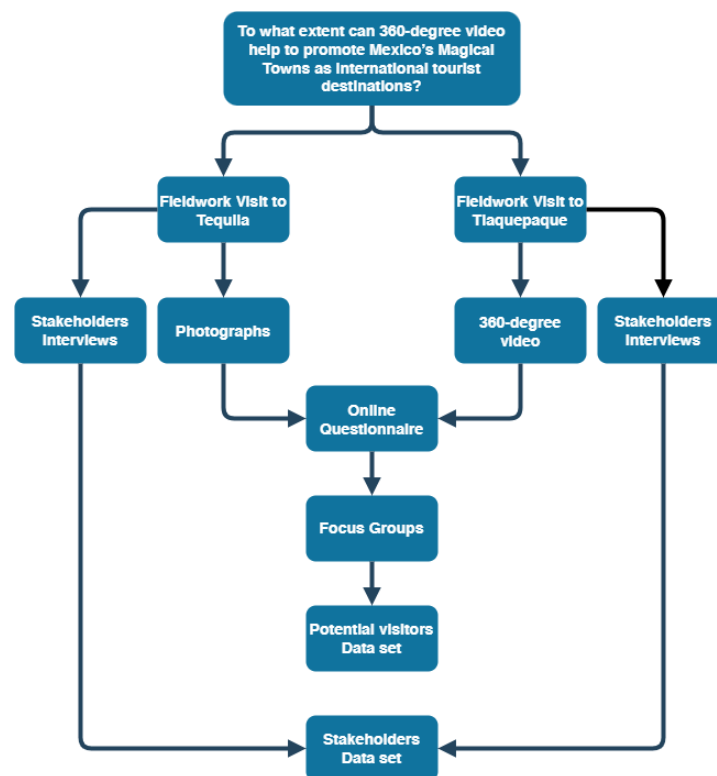


Figure 5.1. Diagram showing the methods design.

A total of 20 individual semi-structured interviews with stakeholders were conducted. There were ten interviews with stakeholders in the town of Tequila and ten with stakeholders in the town of Tlaquepaque. The stakeholders were representatives from the public sector, hotels, restaurants, tour operators/guides, and merchants. Interviews were conducted in different ways, formats, and locations but addressed the same topics and asked similar questions. Six of the interviews took place in person during a fieldwork trip, ten via video call using Zoom, and four via e-mail exchange (see section 5.6). The collected data helped examine the development and implementation of the Magical Towns programme in each town and their promotion. The data collected with said method generated a first data set.

A 360-degree video and still photographs were taken during a two-week fieldwork trip to Tequila and Tlaquepaque. The video was taken with a special six-lens camera and was edited in Newcastle University's facilities (see section 5.5). After the editing process, the photographs and the 360-degree video were used in an online questionnaire that measured potential visitors' perspectives on Mexico, Tequila, Tlaquepaque, and the promotional material. Participants experienced the 360-degree video on cardboard VR HMDs that were provided to their home addresses (see section 5.7). A selection of respondents was invited to attend one of three focus groups after the online questionnaire. In the focus groups, participants compared and discussed both promotional formats expanding their questionnaire answers and providing richer data. The data collected with those two methods generated a second data set.

Having individual semi-structured interviews, online questionnaires, and virtual focus groups in the study helped get a deeper understanding and a richer discussion. In a way, both methods are a type of interview. The main difference, however, lies in how they are conducted, their objectives, and the characteristics of the participants. In this study, individual semi-structured interviews and virtual focus groups followed similar stages, including planning, recruiting, moderating, analysing, and reporting (Morgan, 1998). In order to guide the interviews and focus groups, they required separate sets of questions known as question protocols that contained a list of topics to achieve their objectives. The virtual focus groups, in particular, aimed to complement the questionnaire responses to explain and better understand the results.

5.4 Case study approach

This study compares 360-degree video with traditional still photographs to analyse its effectiveness in promoting Mexico's cultural tourism, focusing on Tequila and Tlaquepaque as case studies. Daymon and Holloway (2011) define case studies as in-depth analyses of specific cases, phenomena, issues, or organisations in their natural contexts. Case studies are not research methods but rather research methodology views or approaches. Using a case study approach, researchers gather data from different perspectives using different methods, such as observations, interviews, document analysis, and focus groups (Creswell and Poth, 2018, p. 153). With a case study approach, this study examined two towns in the Magical Towns programme using individual semi-structured interviews, online questionnaires, and virtual focus groups. Said programme groups 132 Mexican towns with unique historical relevance, beauty, traditions, and other characteristics that give them the potential to become cultural tourist destinations (see section 4.6). With two case studies from the programme, it is possible to find similarities and differences that can guide a discussion with the collected data.

In this study, case studies were selected based on Stake (1995) classification of case studies: intrinsic, instrumental, and collective. Intrinsic case studies are those that are of interest simply because of what they are. In other words, there is an intrinsic interest in learning more about the particular case. A case study is instrumental when it helps to provide a general understanding of a wider phenomenon or when it helps to answer a broader research question. The case study serves as an instrument to accomplish something more than just understanding the case itself. A collective case study approach includes multiple case studies that fulfil one or more of these characteristics (Stake, 2005). A collective case study approach that incorporates both intrinsic and instrumental characteristics contributes to an in-depth understanding of a particular phenomenon. By using a multiple or collective case study approach, this study compares and contrasts the similarities and differences between the two towns. Both case studies have mixed elements of Stake's classification as they have intrinsically interesting characteristics and instrumentally useful features.

On the one hand, the chosen case studies are intrinsically interesting. Having joined the programme in 2003, Tequila is one of the towns with more experience. Tequila has benefited from the public administration experience and infrastructure of the big distilleries that invest heavily in advertising and promotion. The town of Tlaquepaque, however, was added to the programme in 2018 (see Chapter 6) and is filled with local shops, restaurants, bars, and cafés offering cultural and gastronomic experiences in a more bohemian setting. Compared to other towns in the programme, they are both in a privileged position. Tequila is located about an hour's drive from Guadalajara, the capital of the state of Jalisco and the second-largest city in Mexico. Tlaquepaque has been blended into Guadalajara's urban sprawl and is located close to Guadalajara's international airport (see Figure 5.2). Tour companies offer day trips from Guadalajara to both towns, including hop-on-hop-off buses stopping in Tlaquepaque and train experiences to Tequila. Additionally, the towns are within easy reach of Puerto Vallarta (see Figure 5.3), one of Mexico's main beach resorts and the third international airport with the most UK arrivals, just after Cancún and Mexico City (SECTUR, 2019a).

On the other hand, the chosen case studies are instrumentally useful for exploring Mexico's construction of its country identity and country image. Tequila and Tlaquepaque boast unique cultural attributes original to this region of the country that are capitalised as 'authentic' Mexico by the tourism industry (see Chapter 6). Among these elements are the tequila drink, mariachi music, and the *charrería* tradition, which are considered part of Mexico's heritage and national identity. The first is strongly linked to the UNESCO World Heritage Site listed as 'Agave Landscape and Ancient Industrial Facilities of Tequila' (UNESCO, n.d.-b). The second is listed as 'Mariachi, string music, song and trumpet' and the third as 'Charrería, equestrian tradition in

Mexico' in UNESCO's Intangible Cultural Heritage Representative List (UNESCO, n.d.-a). All of these features have been used extensively when portraying representations of Mexico worldwide, making these towns stand out from the rest.

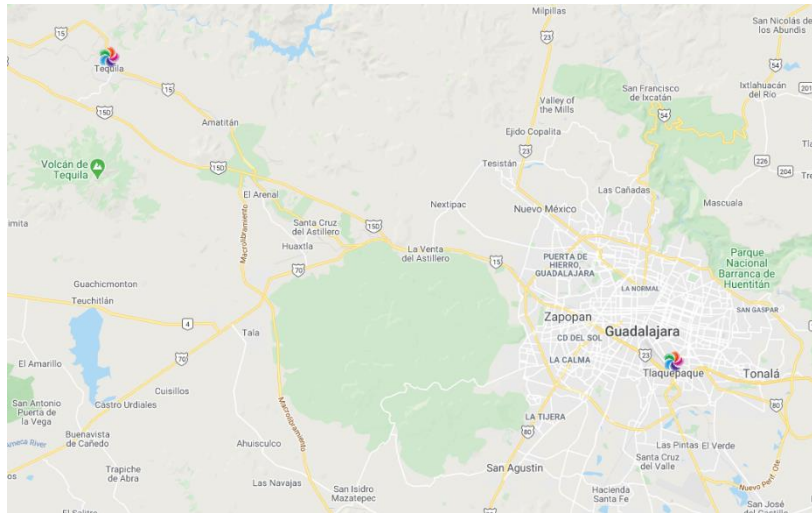


Figure 5.2. Map pinpointing the location of Tequila and Tlaquepaque in relation to the city of Guadalajara.

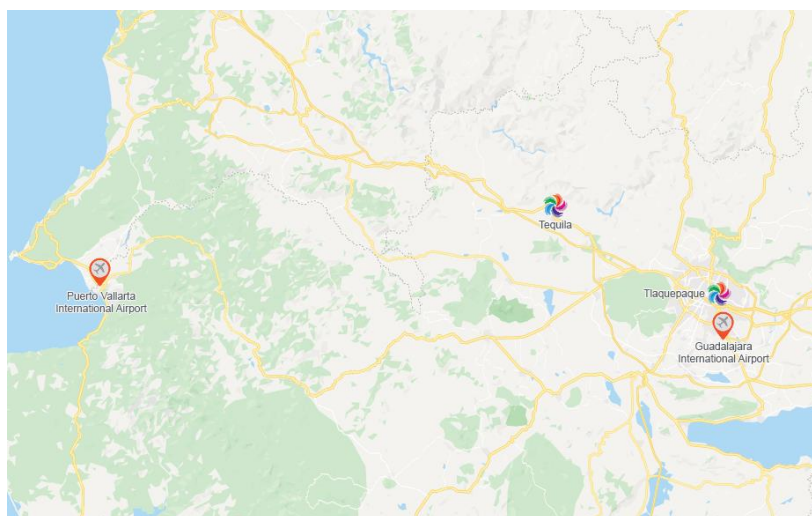


Figure 5.3. Map pinpointing the location of Guadalajara's and Puerto Vallarta's airports in relation to Tequila and Tlaquepaque.

A more robust and holistic outcome was achieved by incorporating intrinsic and instrumental characteristics. The former explored the towns as outstanding examples, whereas the latter explored their symbolic characteristics that contribute to Mexico's country identity and image. A two-case study approach allowed for comparing similarities and differences at different levels. For instance, it allowed comparing the similarities and differences in their PR strategies and promotional material, their stakeholders' influence in decision-making, participation in local committees, issues with residents and pressure groups, or the relationships and communications between the public and private sectors.

One last selection criterion was practicality. Visiting both towns was convenient since they are only an hour and fifteen minutes apart. Visiting both towns was an integral part of the project as it allowed collecting data through semi-structured interviews, filming a 360-degree, taking photographs, speaking with the locals, and inspecting how the Magical Towns brand is being used. However, it is important to note that Tequila and Tlaquepaque are only a representative sample of the towns in the programme and that other towns may have different dynamics and challenges.

5.5 Production of the 360-degree video

In order to test its effectiveness as a promotional tool compared to photographs, a 360-degree video was produced. As shown in Chapter 3, 360-degree video played on VR HMDs provides an immersive experience, unlike traditional video and photographs. Technological advancements provide new ways of promoting destinations, and 360-degree video offers a flexibility and novel experience that could help position a place. The user can experience what it feels like to be in a place before physically visiting it. Traditional video does not have this immersive quality, and photographs do not move. In addition, the democratisation of VR has made the production and distribution of 360-degree videos and VR experiences more accessible. Today, equipment is more affordable and easier to operate than ever. Therefore, those conditions allowed the opportunity to explore said format in the promotion of destinations. The production of the 360-degree video for this study followed a systematic and creative process.

The 360-degree video was made in three stages: pre-production, production, and post-production. In the pre-production stage, two scripts were developed with planned shots, music, voice-over text, and timing. In the production stage, 360-degree footage was filmed in Tlaquepaque, photographs were taken in Tequila, and voice-over audio was recorded. The post-production process involved editing the videos, adding the voice-over, music, and effects, rendering the final video and editing the photographs. The initial plan was to produce two 360-degree videos (one for each town), but technical difficulties have forced the decision to proceed with just one and use photographs for the other town. Figure 5.4 shows the process for each town.

The pre-production stage involved developing scripts for two 360-degree videos and planning the filming. The scripts were written between the 1st and 12th of October 2019 after researching each town's main points of interest and attractions, looking at photographs, videos, and online maps, and listing the shots, timing, and voice-over text (see Appendix A). The voice-over text was developed using historical and cultural information from the towns' websites. The

local authorities were contacted for permission to film in these public places, and all necessary arrangements were made in Newcastle University's Culture Lab for borrowing equipment.

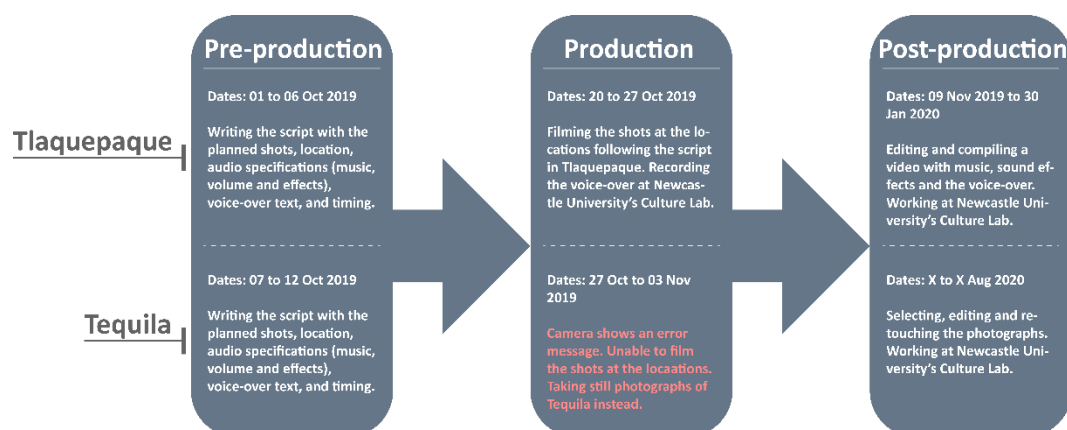


Figure 5.4. Filmmaking process of the 360-degree video and replacement photographs.

The production stage consisted of filming the shots from the script during a two-week visit to the towns and recording the voice-over audio. The visit took place between the 20th of October and the 3rd of November 2019, with the first stop being Tlaquepaque and the second being Tequila. The shots were filmed with equipment borrowed from Newcastle University's Culture Lab, consisting of an omnidirectional Insta360 Pro camera, SanDisk Extreme U3 memory cards of 128GB each, and a Manfrotto 190X tripod (see Figure 5.5). The omnidirectional 360-degree camera is a spherical device with six 8K cameras filming in six directions simultaneously. The memory cards were of the ultra-high speed (U3) required for video cameras of this type and definition. As no camera movements were required, the camera was left standing on the tripod, filming at different locations in Tlaquepaque according to the script (see Figure 5.6).

Technical difficulties impeded filming in Tequila. The initial plan was to produce two 360-degree videos (one for each town), but when inserting a second memory card after the first had been full, the camera displayed a 'speed insufficient' error message as it did not recognize the second card (see Figure 5.7). Despite contacting technical support and trying to fix the issue personally, nothing could be filmed in Tequila. As Tequila's video material was unavailable, still photographs of the town were used in the study instead. As a result, some methodological aspects of the research project were redefined. Tlaquepaque's 360-degree video was compared to Tequila's photographs using an online questionnaire and virtual focus groups.

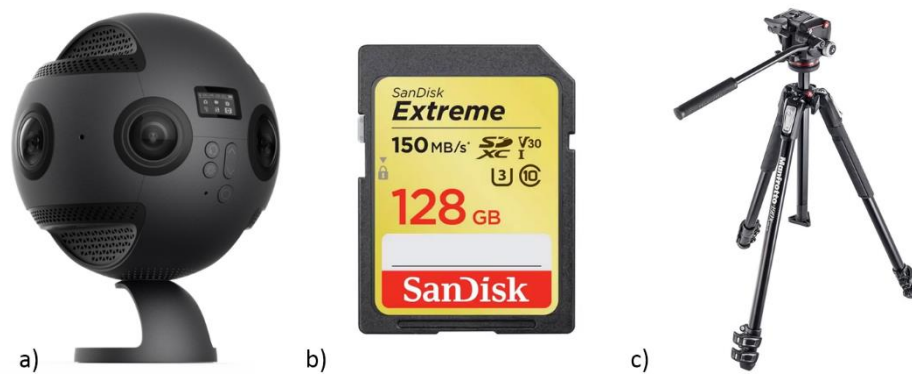


Figure 5.5. Equipment used for the 360-degree video filming. a) Insta360 Pro camera, b) SanDisk Extreme U3 memory card of 128GB, and c) Manfrotto 190X tripod.



Figure 5.6. Photograph taken when setting the camera up in Tlaquepaque.



Figure 5.7. Photograph of the error message on the camera.

The post-production stage involved putting the video material into a final video and digitally retouching the photographs. The recorded six video clips per location (one per camera pointing in a different direction) were stitched together in single long equirectangular stripe-like clips with the Insta360 Stitcher software. The clips were then compiled with music, effects, and voice-over audio using Adobe Premiere Pro video editing software in a Newcastle University Culture Lab's editing suite. A Newcastle University logo nadir image created in Photoshop was added to the video's lower part to cover the tripod. The resulting video was exported in .mp4 format containing the necessary 360-degree video metadata. When played on compatible devices, such as smartphones and VR HMDs, the metadata are interpreted as instructions for playing the video in a 360-degree projection using the device's magnetometer, accelerometer, and gyroscope to move the video around and bring the immersive experience to life. The final video included 360-degree shots of Tlaquepaque's name sign, the central plaza, the bandstand, *Independencia* pedestrian street, and *El Parián* cantina.

5.6 Interviews

In this study, stakeholder perspectives were explored through individual semi-structured interviews. Interviews were originally conceived by positivist researchers as talking questionnaires (Daymon and Holloway, 2011, p. 220). Charles Booth, who surveyed Londoners' economic and social conditions in 1886, is an early example of using interviews as a social survey. They gained popularity in clinical diagnosis and counselling, and during WWI, interviews were used in psychological tests through quantitative research (Fontana and Frey, 2008, p. 121). Today, marketing communications and PR research are mainly associated with interviewing (Moisander and Valtonen, 2006, p. 71; Daymon and Holloway, 2011, p. 220) as it is considered the primary method for gathering data because they represent the core of the nature of enquiry: asking questions (Fontana and Frey, 2008, p. 120).

Individual semi-structured interviews were chosen for this study due to their flexible and open-ended approach in which the researcher and the participant can expand on their comments (Michaelson and Stacks, 2014, p. 101). In qualitative research, interviews became 'a conversation with a purpose' (Daymon and Holloway, 2011, p. 220). Interviews are conducted to obtain interviewees' descriptions and opinions of the phenomenon being researched. During an interview, individuals can open up about their experiences, expectations, and needs (Smith, 2020, p. 91). Semi-structured interviews follow an initial question protocol that can be changed as the interview progresses, unlike unstructured interviews that do not follow a set of questions. As a result of such flexibility, spontaneous responses emerge from a natural conversation that opens the door to new topics not included in the pre-planned list of questions (Daymon and Holloway, 2011, p. 221).

A total of 20 individual interviews were conducted in this study, 10 for each town. In order to gather the opinions of different stakeholders involved in the towns, a representative sample of individuals from the tourism industry, the public sector, and Magical Towns committees were invited to participate in the study. The recruitment process consisted of strategically identifying and contacting individuals through the information available on the Internet. In addition, some interviewees started recommending others to interview, naturally and unintentionally turning the recruitment into snowball sampling. The interviewees were representatives of different sectors of tourism and were classified into five categories: public sector, hotels, restaurants, tour operators/guides, and merchants.

Participants were called for a 45 to 60-minute interview. Interview questions covered seven broad topics related to their town and the Magical Towns programme (see Appendix B). The discussed topics were the decision to become part of the programme and the application

process, the benefits of being in the Magical Towns programme, the cultural influence of the town on the country's identity and image, the use of the Magical Towns' brand, promotion and visual strategies, targeted visitors, and challenges in the future. Six of those interviews were conducted in person during the fieldwork visit to Tequila. They took place in local cafés and restaurants and were audio-recorded. Four interviews were conducted via e-mail exchange, and ten were conducted and recorded via Zoom video call (see Table 5.1). Except for one interview, all others were conducted, transcribed verbatim, and analysed in Spanish, but quotes used in the analysis chapters were translated into English.

	Tequila			Tlaquepaque		
	In person	Video call	E-mail	In person	Video call	E-mail
Public sector	2	0	0	0	1	1
Hotels	0	0	0	0	3	0
Restaurants	2	0	1	0	1	0
Tour operators/guides	2	2	1	0	2	1
Merchants	0	0	0	0	1	0

Table 5.1. Interviews by mode.

Although in-person interviews were ideal, video calls and e-mail exchanges were acceptable alternatives. Video calls were the first alternative to in-person interviews since they were the closest to being face-to-face and allowed interviewees to respond comfortably from their safe environment. However, the quality of Internet connections and the difference in time zones presented challenges. Interviews through e-mail exchange were helpful in interviewing people with busy schedules. They allowed interviewees to see the questions first, reassuring them that none of the questions was sensitive or compromising. Furthermore, interviewees were able to write their answers at their own pace, which allowed them to be more thoughtful and reflexive. E-mail interviews were easier to conduct, as there was no struggle with time zones and transcription. However, non-verbal communication, expressions, and tone of voice were missing (Fontana and Frey, 2008). Both types of online interviews had the advantage of being low-cost.

The interview protocol used Spradley (1979) classification, which included two main types of questions: grand tour and mini-tour. In both types of questions, participants are asked to recall certain activities, events, or routines that took place at specific times and the steps they took during those activities. On the one hand, the grand tour questions are very general and encourage participants to describe events that occurred at a particular place at a particular time or how said place has evolved over time. On the other hand, mini-tour questions are more detailed and cover a shorter period of time. They request the participant to elaborate on their answers and to describe specific events mentioned in the grand tour questions in more detail.

The protocol questions were not asked in order during the interviews but were used as a guide. The question protocol did not include ‘yes’ or ‘no’ questions, as they could have limited the amount of data collected. Instead, the protocol stimulated the conversation by asking the participants for their personal opinions. The protocol structure framed a clear agenda based on interviewees’ spontaneous responses, avoiding wasting time or engaging in ambiguous discussions.

Quantitative researchers often discredit qualitative interviews as unreliable or unobjective. However, when a researcher is interested in what interviewees have to say and understands what they say, this method can yield deep data (Smith, 2020, p. 92). Researchers use qualitative interviews to gain in-depth insights into a topic and develop an understanding of the participants’ professional world, feelings, opinions, and beliefs. In particular, they are helpful when discussing commercially sensitive or confidential topics or when respondents prefer to tell the truth in a controlled environment (Easterby-Smith *et al.*, 2012; Jugenheimer *et al.*, 2014, pp. 84-85).

5.7 Online questionnaires and focus groups

Online questionnaires and virtual focus groups were conducted to examine potential visitors’ perspectives and compare 360-degree video to photographic material. Originally, the research project would have conducted in-person focus groups providing Oculus Go VR HMDs so participants could watch Tlaquepaque’s 360-degree video and discuss their impressions. Unfortunately, this was not possible due to the Covid-19 social distance restrictions. As a replacement for in-person focus groups, online questionnaires and virtual focus groups were used in this study. Online questionnaires included many of the questions originally planned for the in-person focus groups, and the virtual focus groups followed up on the questionnaire’s results and allowed the participants to discuss their answers in greater depth.

Another challenge arose by switching from in-person focus groups to online questionnaires and virtual focus groups: how to provide the VR experience from home. In the absence of Oculus Go VR HMDs, another option was required to provide the VR experience. Thus, each participant received a participant kit at their home address. The kit contained a cardboard VR viewer that they used to watch the 360-degree video on their mobile phones (see Figure 5.8) and an instructions sheet (see Figure 5.9 and Appendix C) with a participant number and a link to the online questionnaire (see Appendix D). On a given page of the questionnaire, participants scanned a QR code, which triggered the 360-degree video on their mobile phones, ready to insert into the cardboard VR viewer provided. After completing the questionnaire, respondents

were filtered based on their answers and invited to attend virtual focus groups on Zoom. The data collection was completed during the national lockdown by adapting the methodology and finding an affordable and feasible alternative.



Figure 5.8. Cardboard VR viewer included in the participant kit.

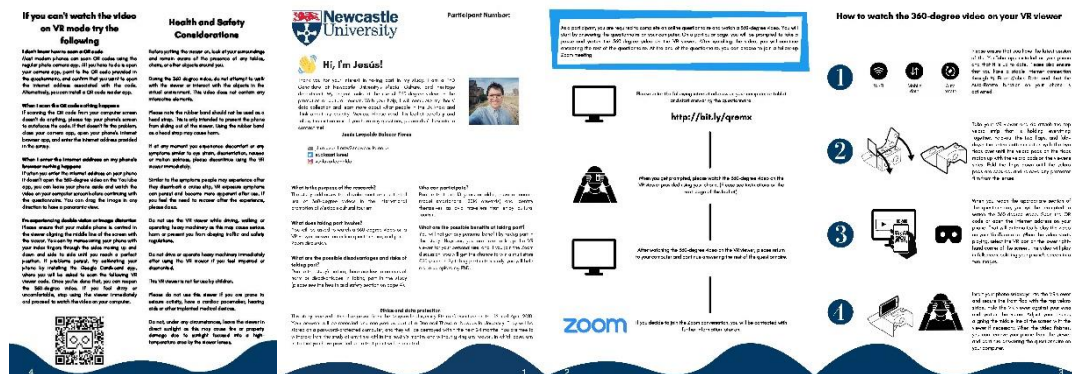


Figure 5.9. Instruction's sheet included in the participant kit (see full-size pages in Appendix C).

5.7.1 Online questionnaires

Recruitment of participants for the online questionnaire and virtual focus groups happened through a self-selection process. Specifically, the study was advertised on mailing lists at Newcastle University, Northumbria University, and the University of Sunderland and in online communities on Reddit, Facebook, and Twitter that focused on special interest groups (see Figure 5.10). Requirements to participate were being 18 years or older, permanently living in the UK, having a recent-model smartphone (2016 onwards), and identifying as an avid traveller that enjoys cultural tourism. The participants self-enrolled by filling in an expression of interest form (see Appendix E).

The participants' selection criteria were designed to recruit a specific type of participant with specific characteristics. Firstly, the targeted demographic was over 18 years old because, according to the Technology Tracker 2019 (Ofcom, 2019), the two age groups with the highest percentage of VR HMD owners and users are 25-34 and 35-54 years old, belonging to the AB social group. Secondly, it was decided to examine the responses of UK residents since the UK is the third country that most visits Mexico, just after the US and Canada (SECTUR, 2019a).

Historically, Mexico's tourism industry has targeted the US and Canada, and the UK is an opportunity to focus on the European market (see Chapter 4). Thirdly, a recent-model smartphone was required since most smartphones manufactured and commercialised from 2016 onwards have the capability to play 360-degree video in VR mode. Lastly, all participants identified themselves as 'avid travellers that enjoy cultural tourism', having this common characteristic that makes them part of a 'tribe' in a segmented audience. By using these selection criteria, the correct type of participants was recruited.

RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS NEEDED

GET A FREE VR VIEWER AND WIN £50

We are looking for committed volunteers to participate in a PhD study about the international promotion of Mexico's cultural tourism. Participants will watch a 360-degree video on a VR viewer, answer a questionnaire, and join a Zoom meeting.

Register your interest at <http://bit.ly/mex360>

Registration closes on 28 March 2021
Limited to 120 participants

Who can participate?

- 18 years or older;
- permanently living in the UK;
- have a recent-model smartphone (2016 onwards); and
- enjoy cultural tourism.

All 120 selected participants will receive a free cardboard VR viewer. Those who also join the Zoom meeting will have the chance to win a multistore £50 voucher.

PLEASE SHARE

Figure 5.10. Call for participants distributed among several special interest groups.

Of 64 enrolled participants, 53 completed the questionnaire, and 37 agreed to participate in an individual interview or focus group (see Table 5.2). The majority of the participants identified as women (56.60%), followed by men (39.62%) and other gender identities (3.77%) (see Figure 5.11). Most participants were 25-34 years old (62.26%), declared they had lived in the UK most of their lives (62.26%) (see Figure 5.11), and never had been to Mexico (73.58%) (see Figure 5.12). Although most of them had never experienced VR or watched a 360-degree video on a viewer or HMD before (39.22%), the percentage of those who had done it once or several times was balanced (see Figure 5.13).

Enrolled participants	64
Total respondents	53
Willing to join an individual interview or focus group	37

Table 5.2. Number of participants in the online questionnaire.

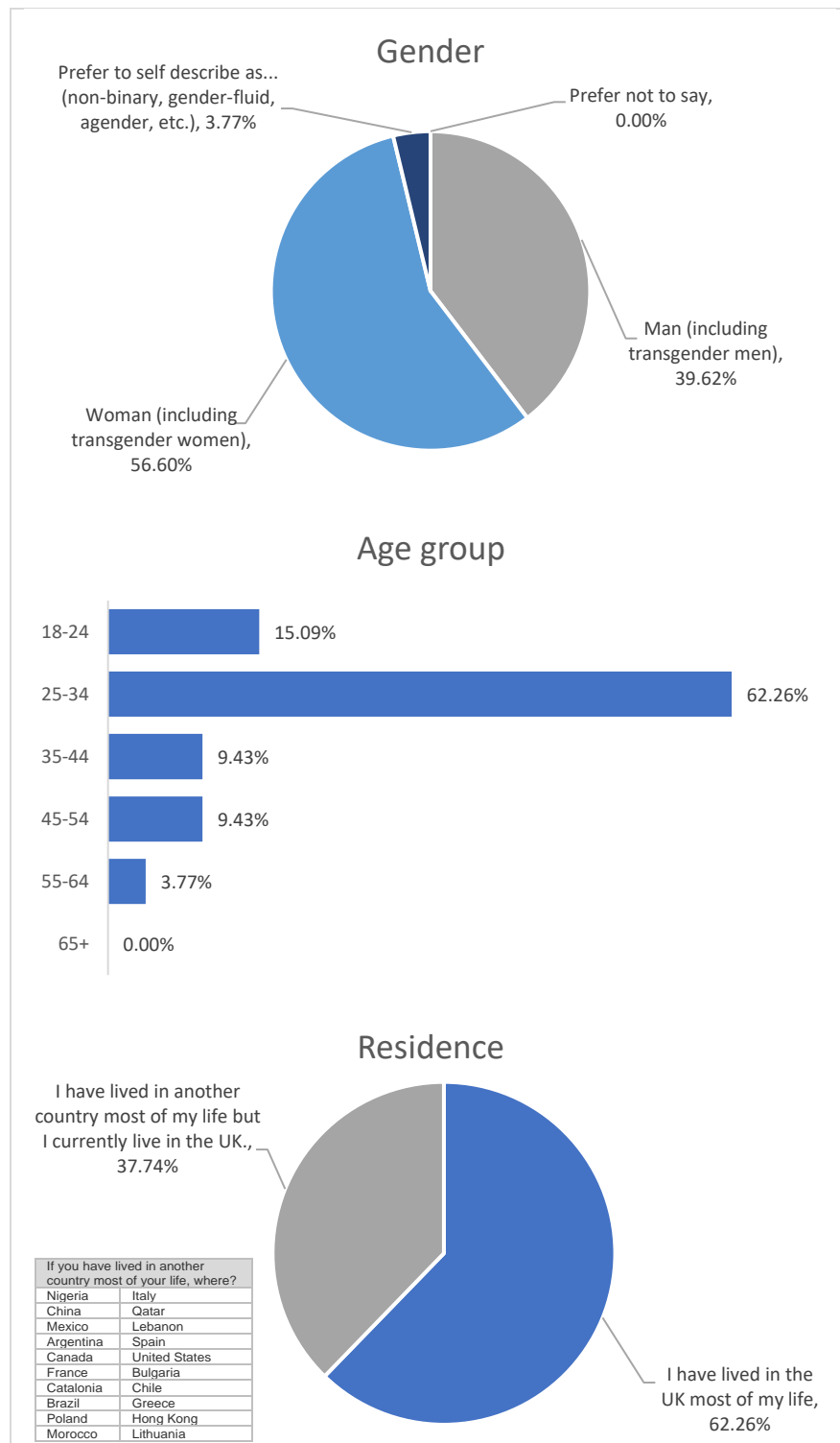


Figure 5.11. Questionnaire respondents' demographic information

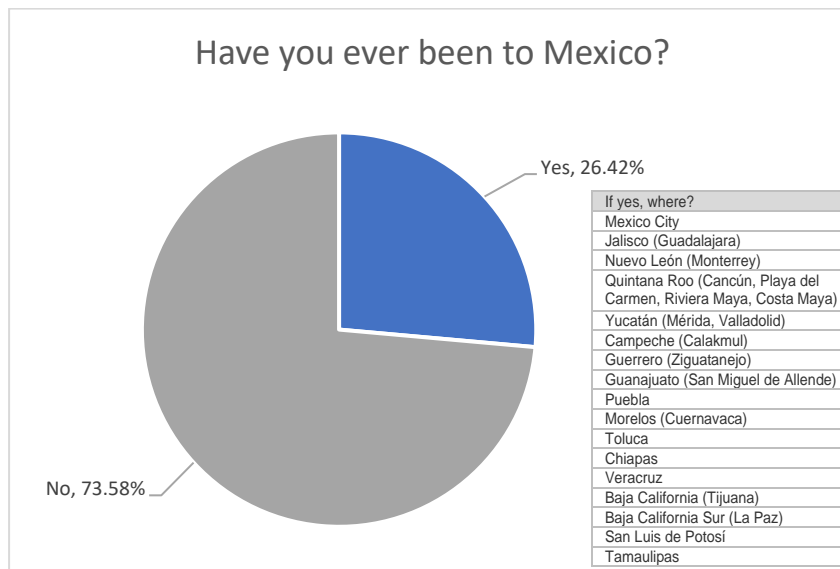


Figure 5.12. Number of participants who had been to Mexico.

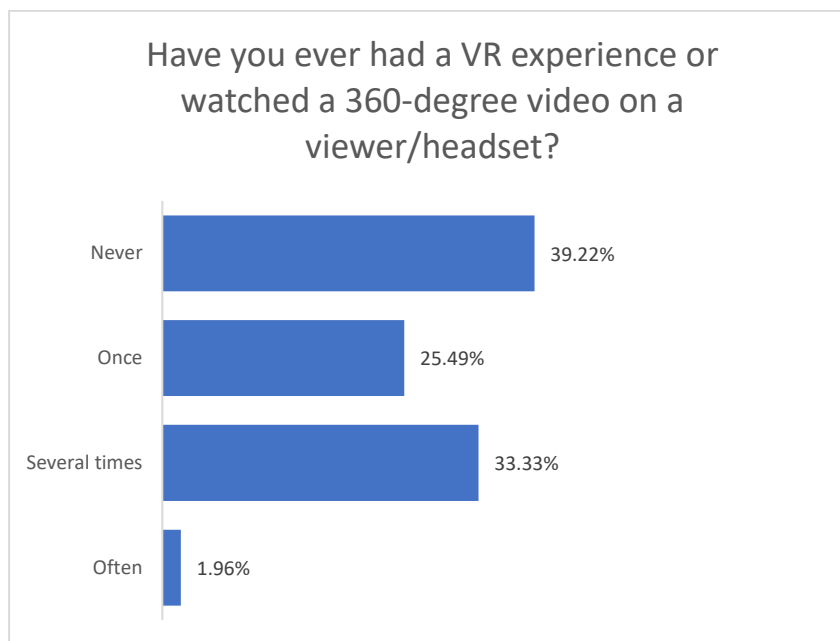


Figure 5.13. Distribution of participants according to their encounters with VR.

There were eight sections in the online questionnaire. Each section assessed different aspects to provide data for the analysis. The questionnaire employed projective and elicitation techniques. These techniques encourage conversation using different stimuli, such as written, visual, or multimedia texts. They are more common in marketing research than in PR because they attempt to understand consumers' motivations and decisions when buying a product. They are also used to explore consumers' reactions to brands, names, colours or shapes of products (Daymon and Holloway, 2011, p. 292). This study used them to explore ideas and feelings towards promotional material. The questionnaire covered topics such as country image, brand awareness, first impressions after looking at photographic material, and first impressions after having a VR experience. It also covered participants' thoughts about each format. There were

various types of questions, including a mix of Likert scales, semantic differential scales, picture association questions, open-ended questions, and optional text boxes to express opinions out of the given choices. The structure of the online questionnaire was as follows.

The first section of the questionnaire covered consent, qualification and control data. Respondents were first required to consent and provide their participant number (provided on the instructions sheet) to easily locate their answers if they ever decided to withdraw from the study. In this section, participants were also asked a few basic questions to determine if they qualified to participate in the study. They were asked if they had received a participants' kit, whether they had ever experienced VR or watched a 360-degree video on an HMD before and how often (never, once, several times, often), and whether they had lived in the UK most of their lives, lived in another country most of their lives but currently live in the UK, or never lived in the UK. As a result of this section, it was possible to filter out those participants who did not meet the required characteristics and to filter responses during the analysis.

The next section explored participants' awareness of Mexico. The participants were asked to rate the quality of four aspects of Mexico based on their personal experiences and knowledge. The four aspects were taken from the aesthetic dimension of Buhmann (2016) country image model (Chapter 2), listed as 'Cultural goods', 'Culinary', 'History and traditions', and 'Landscapes and scenery'. Participants rated the four aspects using a 5-point Likert scale from 'Very poor' to 'Excellent'. Following that, participants were asked to slide bars to the extent they deemed appropriate using a 7-point semantic differential scale based on Martínez and Alvarez (2010) and Griffin *et al.* (2017). The task confronted a series of antonyms including 'inexpensive vs expensive', 'everyday vs exotic', 'dangerous vs safe', 'backward vs advanced', 'traditional vs modern', 'dull vs interesting', and 'boring vs fun'. A picture association activity followed, showing 9 pictures of Mexico in each of Buhmann (2016) aspects of the aesthetic dimension, but dividing 'Landscape and scenery' into 'Natural landscape' and 'Urban landscape'. This section aimed to understand participants' general impressions of Mexico before they were exposed to the VR experience.

The subsequent section focused on how participants formed their impression of Mexico. Participants were asked to rank in order of importance ten sources of information that helped them form an impression of Mexico. The list of sources consisted of 'TV/Streaming services', 'Films', 'Books', 'Magazines/brochures', 'Formal education and museums', 'Word of mouth', 'Internet/social media', 'Radio', 'Newspapers', and 'Events (music, sports, etc.)' and an optional box to list other sources. They were then asked to reflect on their previous responses by answering the open-ended question 'Why do you think you have that impression of the country?'. This section helped understand why they think of Mexico in such a way.

Next, the questionnaire explored brand and town awareness. Participants were shown Mexico's country brand and the Magical Towns brand and asked if they remembered seeing them before. Then, they were asked where they had seen it. Additionally, they were asked if they had heard of 'Tequila', followed by the question 'What is Tequila?', with the possible answers being 'A drink', 'A place', 'A dish', 'I don't know', and 'Other (please specify)'. The same two questions were asked again, but this time about Tlaquepaque. This section provided an insight into the popularity of Mexico's country brand, the places where participants have seen both brands and their awareness of Tequila and Tlaquepaque.

The questionnaire assessed participants' impressions of Tequila and the effectiveness of photographs. Participants were shown 18 photographs of Tequila, some taken during the fieldwork visit, and others were public domain or Creative Commons licensed. Using a 5-point Likert scale, they were asked if they agreed or disagreed with travel and outreach intention statements based on Griffin *et al.* (2017) and Wagler and Hanus (2018). The statements were 'I would seek information about Tequila', 'I would consider visiting Tequila', 'I would tell others and share Tequila's photographs', and 'I would recommend visiting Tequila'. Next, participants were asked to confront antonyms again (e.g. 'dangerous vs safe'), but this time focusing on Tequila. Then, they were asked to rate Tequila's photographs on a 5-point Likert scale from 'Very poor' to 'Excellent'. In this task, elements of Jefkins (1994) and Wagler and Hanus (2018) were combined to measure photographs' ability to change negative attitudes to positive ones. The statements were 'Offered a realistic view', 'Held my attention', 'Was enjoyable', 'Amazed me', 'Got me interested', 'Taught me something', 'Changed my views', and 'Encouraged me to visit'. Participants were then asked to reflect by answering the open-ended question 'Why did you rate Tequila's photographs that way?'.

The same set of tasks was repeated for the 360-degree video. At this point of the questionnaire, participants were requested to pause, take their mobile phones, scan the QR code provided, and follow the instructions sheet to watch the 360-degree video using the VR viewer provided. A text box was provided for them to write about any issues they encountered while watching the video or using the VR viewer. Following that, the same questions as with the photographs were repeated. They were asked to indicate whether they agreed or disagreed with the same set of statements (e.g. 'I would seek information about Tlaquepaque') on a 5-point Likert scale. Next, they were required to complete the same 7-point semantic differential scale task confronting antonyms (e.g. 'dangerous vs safe') but now focusing on Tlaquepaque. Then they were asked to rate how well the 360-degree video accomplished the same series of statements (e.g. 'Held my attention') using a 5-point Likert scale. They were also asked to reflect

by answering the open-ended question, ‘Why did you rate Tlaquepaque’s 360-degree video that way?’.

Then, in the next questionnaire section, participants evaluated both formats. They were asked to write a piece describing which format they thought better promoted the town’s tourism and why. The participants had the opportunity to express which format was more impactful, describe the advantages and disadvantages of each format, or explain why one format was better than the other. This task provided rich data about their thoughts as users. The last section of the questionnaire asked for personal demographic information such as gender identity and age group, with a final question asking if they were willing to discuss their views in more detail, either individually or in small virtual groups.

5.7.2 Focus groups

The online questionnaire was followed by focus groups to dig deeper into participants’ responses. Focus groups are usually led by a moderator to explore participants’ perceptions, attitudes, and opinions about a given topic (Jugenheimer *et al.*, 2014, p. 68). Sociologists first used them in the 1940s to gauge attitudes towards US participation in WWII by observing individuals’ reactions to radio propaganda (Merton, 1987; Barbour, 2008). Researchers referred to this method as ‘focused interviews’ (see Merton and Kendall, 1946), and although they did not differentiate between individual and group interviews, they acknowledged that group interviews could provide richer data and eventually published a manual (see Merton *et al.*, 1956). The method, as we know it today, developed in the early 1990s and flourished in different fields. Frey and Fontana (1993) used the term ‘group interviews’ to describe a research approach based on observing and analysing a group’s interaction in discussions. The use of focus groups increased in marketing, PR research, political communication, and organisational research (Kidd and Parshall, 2000; Fern, 2001; Hollander, 2004; Daymon and Holloway, 2011, p. 244). The marketing field developed most manuals and procedures due to its natural feature of hearing consumers’ opinions (Barbour, 2008; Cyr, 2019).

Focus groups were used in this study because they are a very versatile method for marketing communications and PR research. They help shed light on issues by studying groups with common characteristics, ideas, identities, and norms in a carefully designed discussion. Focus groups are often used to test communication programmes where participants are exposed to piloting campaigns or promotional materials and asked for their opinions on their suitability (Michaelson and Stacks, 2014, p. 104). In marketing and PR, focus groups are helpful because they provide something hundreds of surveys cannot, the ability to hear opinions directly from

consumers or the publics, getting and gauging their feedback to make better decisions (Jugenheimer *et al.*, 2014, pp. 68-69). Focus groups allow for the collection of large amounts of data in a short time, both from the interaction of the group as a whole and from several individual reactions simultaneously (Carey and Smith, 1994, p. 125; Daymon and Holloway, 2011, p. 242; Cyr, 2019, p. 5). They are also cheaper to conduct and easier to transcribe than conducting and transcribing many individual interviews.

In this study, online questionnaire respondents were filtered, grouped according to their responses, and invited to a Zoom focus group (see Figure 5.14). First, all responses from participants who agreed to participate in a focus group were isolated. Then, from those willing to participate in the focus group, all those who had never visited Mexico were selected. They were divided according to their experience with VR. There was a group of those who had never used VR before, those who had at least tried it once, and those who had used VR several times. Participants were invited to attend their respective focus groups, and all information and the Zoom link were sent to them via e-mail. The focus groups took place virtually due to Covid-19 social distance regulations.

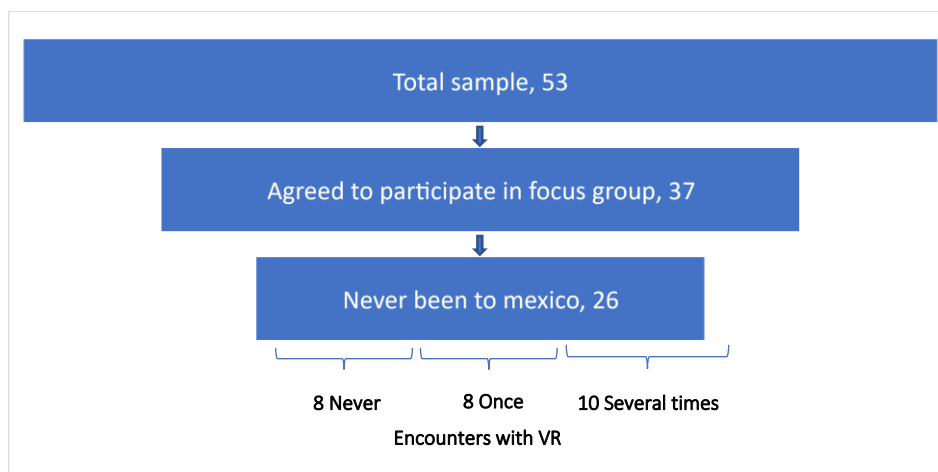


Figure 5.14. Number of participants filtered and invited to attend a focus group.

The focus groups were researcher-constituted, composing a sample of participants who had never been to Mexico. In order to avoid reaching a point of ‘data saturation’ and the ideas becoming repetitive, the sampling process targeted to have at least six participants in each group and to conduct only three focus groups (Morgan, 1996; Cyr, 2019, p. 42). Only 13 of the 26 participants who were invited to participate in their focus group attended. As a way to identify the groups, they were named ‘Never’, ‘Once’, and ‘Several’ in reference to the number of encounters participants had with VR before the study. There was a focus group of 5 participants who had never had a VR experience before, another group of 4 participants who had experienced VR at least once, and another group of 4 who had used VR several times. Since the

answers from the three focus groups were not significantly different, the data from the three groups were combined along with the questionnaire responses in a single data set.

The focus groups consisted of one-hour sessions, and they were held and recorded on Zoom. The three focus groups covered four main topics: 'Country image', 'Travel intention', 'Decision-making process', and '360-degree video'. During the discussion, participants were asked to share their opinions about using Tequila's photographs and Tlaquepaque's 360-degree video for promotional purposes and other questions relevant to the study. As with the individual interviews, the focus groups' protocol did not include yes or no questions. Moreover, the discussion was limited to twelve questions because, according to Cyr (2019, p. 55), more questions would have sacrificed the unique depth of focus groups. Having a limited time and a limited set of questions allowed for a substantial discussion and helped avoid participants' fatigue, making the focus groups very dynamic. Graphs showing the online questionnaire results were used as a visual aid to lead the conversation. The focus group slides can be found in Appendix F. Focus group participants received the chance to win a £50 multistore voucher that was drawn after completing the focus groups as a reward for their time.

The first step was to brief participants about the focus groups. They were informed that the Zoom meeting was being recorded, and they were required to express verbal consent. Then, basic focus group rules, such as staying on topic and respecting other participants' opinions, were explained and agreed upon. Participants introduced themselves in an ice-breaking activity, and an outline of the topics to be covered in the session was presented.

The 'Country image' topic explored participants' perception of Mexico in more detail. Participants were asked to write down three words that come to mind when they think of Mexico, and then they discussed how they would describe Mexico to others. Participants were then shown preliminary questionnaire results, which included the top three pictures chosen for each of Buhmann (2016) categories of the aesthetic dimension. This naturally led to a discussion of what they thought caused the results to come up in such a manner. Likewise, it encouraged a discussion about the imagery associated with the country. Afterwards, participants were shown graphs and charts with preliminary results of the awareness questionnaire section to discuss whether they had heard of Tequila and Tlaquepaque.

In the 'Travel intention' topic, participants were asked about their likelihood of visiting Mexico and some of the towns listed in the Magical Towns programme. Participants were shown pictures of different Magical Towns and explained what the Magical Towns programme is about. They then were asked if they would travel to places like Tequila and Tlaquepaque if they had the resources and opportunity. Explaining and presenting more Magical Towns and the hypothetical scenario encouraged participants to discuss their travel intentions.

The ‘Decision-making process’ topic explored participants’ sources of travel information in further detail and how they make travel decisions. By using mini-tour questions, participants were asked to describe how they decide where to travel and where they seek information when deciding about a destination. They were then presented with the results graph from the semantic differential scales and asked their thoughts on how 360-degree video might have affected their opinions.

The ‘360-degree video’ topic covered matters related to participants’ VR experience. In this topic, the focus groups asked questions of idealisation. This type of question is also known as ‘posing the ideal’ (Schatzman and Strauss, 1973) and is used to make participants speculate about how an ideal situation or an ideal product would be. In this instance, they were consulted for their opinions on the ideal implementation of 360-degree video as a promotional tool. Also, participants were asked if they would watch a 360-degree video again, and if so, how often. Last but not least, they were asked how they would describe people who use virtual reality videos to explore places before visiting them. During the closing remarks, participants were asked to suggest other ways to promote cultural tourism.

In order to avoid groupthink, participants were asked to write down some of their answers before discussing them. It is common for participants in focus groups to develop groupthink because other participants’ opinions can influence them. Group dynamics can sometimes lead participants to say things that do not necessarily reflect their genuine opinions. The phenomenon occurs when participants feel pressured into agreeing with the opinions of others instead of challenging them. This is because they are trying to gain approval from the rest of the group, thereby creating an unintentional consensus. Groupthink happens for different reasons. In some discussions, participants may be very reserved or timid, or one or two may take the lead and involuntarily dominate the conversation (Daymon and Holloway, 2011; Cyr, 2019, pp. 33-34). This ‘preference towards agreement’ (Vicsek, 2010, p. 132) can, unfortunately, bias the results. By asking participants to write down their answers, they were able to elaborate on their first impressions and thoughts.

The generalisation of the findings is something challenging to achieve in focus groups. In order to achieve this, it is necessary to undertake a substantial probability sampling, and sometimes this could mean making heroic efforts. The number of focus groups necessary to achieve and establish such generalisation is complicated to arrange and may not always be ideal. Acknowledging that focus groups cannot provide generalisation is sometimes better and more realistic. However, focus groups can also provide generalisation in other ways. The lessons learned from exploring a group of individuals in a particular context could be applied to other

similar situations. This could occur when working with groups that share similar experiences and interests, like the participants in this study.

5.8 Data analysis

Following data collection, a thematic analysis was conducted. Thematic analysis is a flexible method that, unlike other types of analysis (such as IPA, thematic DA, or grounded theory), gives the researcher theoretical freedom that helps interpret data sets by identifying, analysing, and naming patterns. Said theoretical freedom helps the researcher to provide their interpretation of the themes and establish linkages in a coherent argument. The thematic analysis in this study followed Braun and Clarke (2006) six-phase method in a systematic process that involved reading, coding, interpreting and organising the data into relevant themes.

The first phase involved familiarisation with the data. The recorded verbal data was transcribed, imported into NVivo and classified into two separate data sets. One data set contained the stakeholders' perspectives from the interviews, and the other included the participants' perspectives from the online questionnaire and focus group responses combined. This phase involved actively reading and re-reading both data sets, searching for initial patterns and ideas for future codes.

In order to identify themes, both data sets were carefully broken down and organised in a process known as coding. Coding is a fundamental component of qualitative data analysis because it allows for creating common themes and classifying data through meaning-making interpretations (Morse and Richards, 2002; Smith, 2020, p. 93). A code is a label representing an idea in parts of a text. By giving ideas a code name, the process groups similar responses and opinions into categories that later become themes. In addition to organizing the data, coding helps interpret and compare it creatively and intuitively, finding and defining common patterns (Daymon and Holloway, 2011, p. 306). In this study, the coded texts were the transcripts of the individual interviews, the open-ended responses from the questionnaire, and the transcripts of the focus groups.

Both data sets were coded separately by capturing ideas and grouping them with the same label. The first data set (stakeholders' interviews) was fully coded in an initial attempt to generate themes. However, the resulting themes mirrored the interview protocol, committing something Braun and Clarke (2006) consider a common mistake. Further re-reading and re-coding of the data helped to amend the mistake and generated a codebook for each data set. The first data set's codebook included codes such as 'the brand is important', 'there are many events', 'businesses make all the promotion', 'most people don't use the brand', 'need for more promotion',

‘Tlaquepaque was already well-positioned’, ‘there is bad management’, and ‘most international tourists are from the US’, among others. The second data set, which comprised of data from the questionnaire and focus groups, included codes such as ‘I didn’t know Tequila was a place’, ‘Tequila looks like a place I would like to visit’, ‘VR video was very immersive’, ‘VR requires too much effort’, ‘VR was a novel experience’, and ‘watching the VR video changed my views of Mexico’ to name a few.

Semantic themes were created in the third, fourth, and fifth phases. The process involved searching for themes, reviewing them, and naming them. A first look at the codes examined how different codes contained repeated information and were therefore merged. Then, a second look at them focused on how the refined codes could be grouped to create comprehensive themes. Some of these codes formed sub-themes, which in turn, formed broader main themes to organise the data sets in coherent patterns, while others were discarded or allocated to a different sub-theme. The themes and sub-themes were named using simpler words that encapsulated the ‘essence’ of the themes based on the group of codes’ common characteristics. This process involved taking an active role in interpreting the data and codes, as according to Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 96), ‘themes do not just emerge’. The data was organised and represented in thematic maps that served as a structure for the final report.

The thematic analysis is presented over four chapters. Chapter 6 examines Tequila and Tlaquepaque as destinations. The theme ‘Destination’ analyses the towns’ features, their Magical Town designations, and the local tourist industry challenges. The theme ‘Visitors’ discusses the differences between domestic and international tourists and their behaviour and interactions in Tequila and Tlaquepaque. Chapter 7 analyses stakeholders’ perspectives on the programme and its communication challenges. The theme, ‘Programme’, examines the positive and negative aspects of the Magical Towns programme in each town. The theme ‘Communication’ examines their communication and promotional strategies and issues. Chapter 8 analyses participants’ responses to the online questionnaires and focus groups, following an explanatory sequential design with the primary focus on the qualitative data. The theme ‘Impression’ analyses participants’ perspectives on branding, their impressions of Mexico, the sources of their impressions, and their impressions of Tequila and Tlaquepaque after looking at the photographs and 360-degree video. The theme ‘Promotion’ examines the advantages and disadvantages of photographs and 360-degree video. Chapter 9 continues with the analysis with the theme ‘Travel’, exploring participants’ planning and decision-making processes, sources for travel information, and their intention to travel to Mexico.

5.9 Methodological limitations and ethical considerations

As explained in Chapter 1, two main challenges arose during the study: filming technical difficulties and the Covid-19 pandemic. During the 360-degree video filming in Tequila, the camera unexpectedly stopped working, giving a speed error message, and the project had to continue with the footage of only one town. Additionally, the Covid-19 pandemic seriously affected the Mexican tourism industry, with many stakeholders being unavailable for interviews. Due to the national lockdown, the raw video footage was kept locked in Newcastle University's Culture Lab and could not be edited until the university's facilities were reopened. Therefore, the focus groups were rescheduled eight months later and held virtually due to the social distance restrictions. The original research plan and methodology were redefined to overcome these challenges.

The individual interviews presented different challenges before, during, and after they were conducted. Before the interviews took place, it was not easy to contact and confirm prospective interviewees. The majority of them did not reply to the e-mails immediately, and some were easier to reach on Facebook than via their institutional e-mail addresses or phone calls. Furthermore, some stakeholders changed the date, time, or location of their in-person interview last minute. In the course of the interviews, some interruptions occurred, such as phone calls and people coming into the interviewees' offices. Some interviews were conducted in public places where ambient noise, refurbishment works, and servers caused distractions. Additionally, there were occasional intermittent interruptions in the video call interviews caused by the unstable Internet connection of some interviewees. After the interviews, challenges included transcribing long audio files, which was time-consuming and often difficult due to ambient noise and interruptions. The informality of the interviewees and the place where the interviews took place were the two primary complications.

Ethical considerations were taken throughout the project. Specifically, ethical considerations were taken regarding the right to free and informed choice, protection from harm, anonymity and confidentiality, and informed consent. Each participant in the individual interviews and focus groups received an information sheet describing the study and its purposes (see Appendix G). In the instructions sheet for the VR experience, participants were given health and safety information. Likewise, all participants were required to consent with the option to remain anonymous. Interviewees signed consent forms (see Appendix G), questionnaire respondents ticked consent boxes, and focus group participants gave verbal consent. The health and safety of all those involved in the project were essential. The fieldwork trip was preceded by a risk assessment that took appropriate considerations into account. The few in-person interviews took place

in public places, and the rest of them, along with the focus groups, took place via Zoom from their safe environments. This study obtained ethical approval from the Newcastle University Ethics Committee on the 16th of April 2018. No significant ethical concerns or issues arose during the research project.

5.10 Conclusion

This chapter reviewed the way in which the research project was conducted and the data collected and analysed. It presented a methodological discussion by defining relevant aspects of qualitative research and the methods used in the study, concluding that qualitative research is very flexible and relies on the researcher's interpretation of the world based on their background and theoretical constructs. This study follows a case study approach in a qualitative inductive methodology using semi-structured interviews, online questionnaires, and virtual focus groups as primary research methods.

The research project selected and studied two towns that are part of the Magical Towns programme. These towns were carefully selected based on specific criteria that proved them outstanding and particularly interesting for this study. The interviews were conducted as individual semi-structured conversations with stakeholders that play different roles within the towns' tourism industry. That includes people from the public administration, hotels, restaurants, tour operators/guides, and merchants. Many of them actively participate in their local Magical Towns committees and in promoting their town as a tourist destination. Although most of the interviews took place through video calls, some of them were conducted in person.

A two-week fieldwork visit to Tequila and Tlaquepaque took place from the 20th of October to the 3rd of November 2019. During this visit, it was intended to film two 360-degree videos, but technical difficulties only allowed filming in one town, Tlaquepaque. Nonetheless, photographic material was taken in Tequila. To compare both types of promotional material, the 360-degree video and the photographs were used in an online questionnaire. Participants watched Tlaquepaque's 360-degree video on their mobile phones using a cardboard VR viewer provided in a participant kit that was sent to their home addresses. A number of questionnaire respondents were filtered and invited to participate in one of three focus groups. They formed a group of participants who had never had a VR experience before, another of those who had had it at least once, and another with participants who had done it several times.

Despite the fact that both individual interviews and focus groups are considered types of interviews, they were employed for different purposes. The individual interviews were used to collect stakeholders' opinions in each town, and the focus groups collected the opinions of

potential visitors, primarily regarding the potential use of 360-degree videos as a promotional tool. The resulting data from the interviews, questionnaire, and focus groups were transcribed, imported, and analysed in NVivo following Braun and Clarke (2006) thematic analysis method.

Finally, the research project had no major ethical concerns. During all stages of the project, all ethical, health, and safety measures were considered. Specifically, ethical considerations were taken regarding the right to free and informed choice, protection from harm, anonymity and confidentiality, and informed consent. Participants received information sheets, health and safety information, and consent forms with the option to remain anonymous. Taking part in this study was voluntary for all participants.

Chapter 6. Tequila and Tlaquepaque: A Case Study approach

6.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the first part of a thematic analysis of the data collected through the 20 individual semi-structured interviews held with stakeholders in the Magical Towns of Tequila and Tlaquepaque. As explained in Chapter 5, the interviewees made up a heterogeneous sample that included representatives of different areas related to tourism divided into five categories: public sector, hotels, restaurants, tour operators/guides, and merchants. Six interviews took place in person at local cafés and restaurants during a fieldwork visit in Tequila, four through email exchange, and ten on Zoom video calls. All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analysed in Spanish using NVivo, but quotes were translated into English for this chapter. All interviewees got assigned an identification name comprised of the first three letters of the town and their interviewee number (e.g. Teq1, Teq2, Tla1, Tla2, etc. see full stakeholders list in Appendix H).

This thematic analysis followed Braun and Clarke (2006) method by coding and organising the data into relevant themes. Four main themes were identified during the analysis, namely Destination, Visitors, Programme, and Communication, with respective subthemes. However, this chapter only focuses on the first two, Destination and Visitors, while the second part presented in Chapter 7 covers Programme and Communication. This first part of the analysis introduces Tequila and Tlaquepaque, their activities as destinations and the characteristics and issues of their visitors.

6.2 Destination

The first identified theme cover aspects related to Tequila and Tlaquepaque as destinations. It looks at six subthemes: Destination characteristics, Magical Town designation, Misuse and misrepresentation of local culture and heritage, Names of the towns, Professionalisation and Lack of tourist infrastructure. See Figure 6.1 for reference.

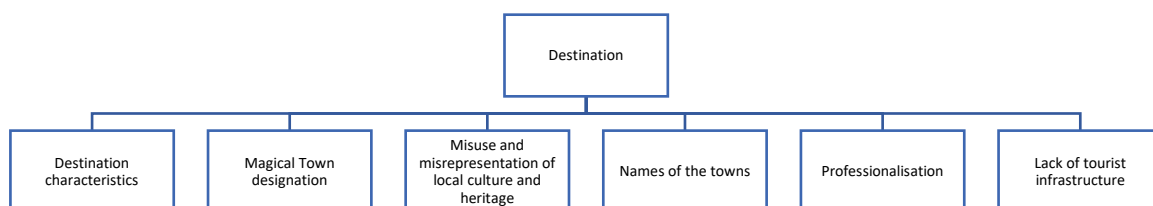


Figure 6.1. Thematic map of the theme Destination.

6.2.1 Destination characteristics

Tequila is a small town in the state of Jalisco at a two-hour drive from the city of Guadalajara, and it obtained its Magical Town designation in 2003 (SECTUR, 2019d). It is one of the first and most emblematic towns in the programme. According to stakeholder Teq10 (a Tequila writer and tour guide), a businesspeople elite related to the tequila industry led the town's tourist development. First, this group lobbied for obtaining the protected designation of origin in 1974, which protects and regulates the production of tequila in a designated area of Mexico, benefiting and consolidating the tequila industry. This same group sought to obtain the Magical Town designation in 2003 to attract tourism and looked for the protection of the agave landscape, which in 2006 was inscribed on UNESCO's World Heritage List. In the same year, they integrated the designation of origin, the agave landscape, and the Magical Town designation in a tourism product denominated the Tequila Trail (*Ruta del Tequila*).

The Tequila Trail project developed a regional tourist route with some of the existing infrastructure. It started encouraging visitors to stop at towns to sightsee places such as old distilleries, warehouses, haciendas, and buildings from the eighteenth century and partake in activities related to tequila production (see Figure 6.2) (García and Méndez, 2018b, p. 33). This project was financed by the Inter-American Development Bank and led by the Tequila Regulatory Council (CRT), a private, not-for-profit organisation that integrates all tequila production stakeholders into a group that promotes the culture around the drink and the quality control of its production (CRT, 2019).



Figure 6.2. Tequila Trail (*Ruta del Tequila*) map (by CRT).

To achieve such a reimagining, Tequila needed to change its mindset from a highly industrial town to a cultural destination. Public spaces like restaurants and cafés started showcasing Mexican traditions such as mariachi music and folk dances. Among said spaces, distilleries stood out as the main attractions. Stakeholder Teq10 said that José Cuervo tequila was one of the leaders in giving spaces to present the state of Jalisco's folklore, keeping traditions alive and serving as a venue where tourists could appreciate it. Additionally, distilleries like José Cuervo's La Rojeña and Sauza's Casa Sauza opened their doors to the public and started offering guided tours (see Figure 6.3). For stakeholder Teq10, Tequila had to learn how to treat tourists and adapt themselves to a new reality where distilleries became attractions:

It seems like they took good decisions that favoured the socio-economic development of the town. They have changed the lives of many distilleries in their vocation. In the past, they were only seen as factories, and now they are tourist attractions and they are the protagonists in the world of tequila. They have stopped being jealous, looking inside, trying to hide industrial secrets, and have begun to open up and share experiences contributing to the Magical Town experience of visitors.

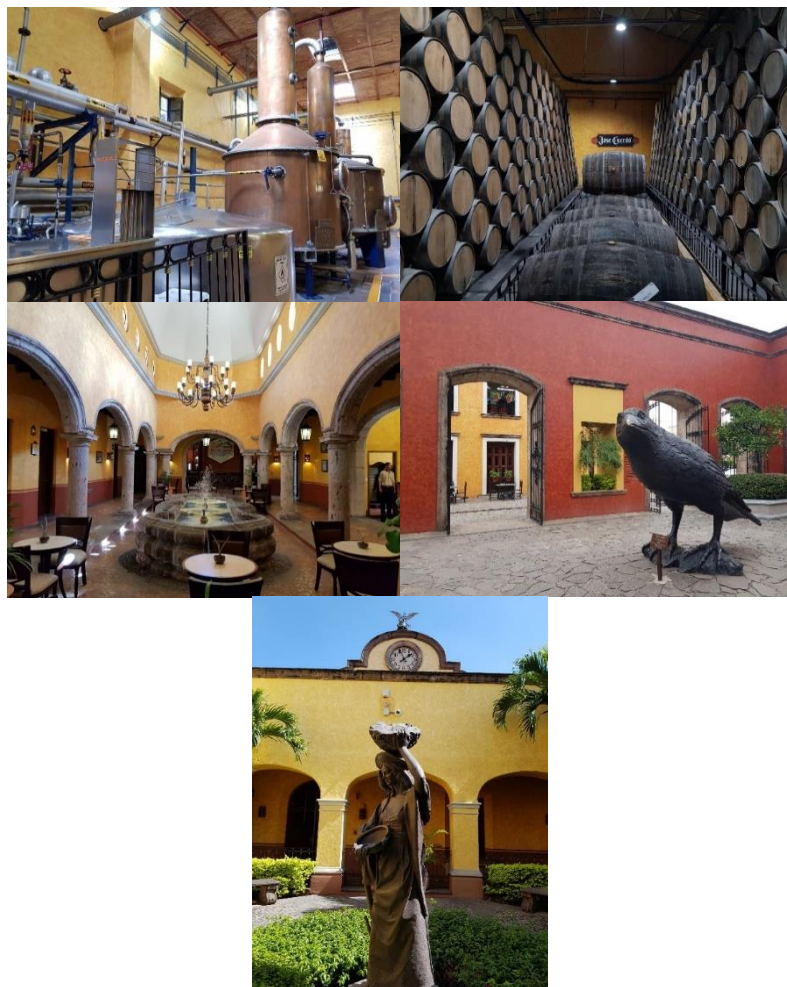


Figure 6.3. Photographs of the exterior and interior of La Rojeña, José Cuervo tequila's distillery (by author, 2019).

Today, Tequila offers a comprehensive experience. Its tourism industry focuses on attracting visitors interested in the drink's making process and the culture around it. A division of the international tequila maker José Cuervo known as Mundo Cuervo runs many of the tourist attractions in the town. Mundo Cuervo is a complex of buildings that includes its main distillery, a five-star hotel, a cultural centre and museum, venues, cafés, restaurants, and different tours and experiences such as the old-fashioned train ride José Cuervo Express (see Figure 6.4). Said train connects the city of Guadalajara with Tequila, offering an experience full of colour, mariachi music, folk dances, local food samples, and tequila tasting.

The non-stop train ride terminates at the José Cuervo tequila distillery La Rojeña, where visitors take a tour to learn the tequila-making process (CPTM, n.d.-c). According to stakeholder Teq2 (an experienced tour guide), Guadalajara's Chamber of Commerce started running the train to Tequila under the name of Tequila Express, and José Cuervo tequila eventually took over it renaming it as José Cuervo Express. For stakeholder Teq5 (who has worked in the food service and tourism industries for many years), when the train tour began operations about 20 years ago, it was not part of the plan that tourists would explore the town, and instead, everything happened within José Cuervo's facilities. However, nowadays, they give visitors around 2 hours to explore the town independently and do some local shopping before taking them back to Guadalajara. Due to its high demand and success, other distilleries like Casa Herradura have their own trains and tours departing from Guadalajara. Stakeholder Teq1 (a restaurant owner) said that at some point, the José Cuervo Express train became Tequila's main activity, promoting the town and putting it on the international spot.

Other attractions include the town's centre, eco-tourism activities, and tours in the agave fields. In the town's centre, besides Mundo Cuervo, visitors can stroll around Tequila's main square, visit Santiago Apóstol parish church (see Figure 6.5), the National Museum of Tequila, and can consume at local restaurants and cafés. Tequila's natural attractions include the volcano of Tequila and the blue agave fields, a landscape that was declared a UNESCO World Heritage site in 2006 (CPTM, n.d.-b) and activities such as glamping, visits to the volcano, horse riding, and hot air balloon tours. Many tours showcase Mexican culture, traditions, and the tequila-making process, from harvesting the agave fields to distilling the spirit. Many local tours take tourists to visit the blue agave fields by either car or horse riding to admire the site and learn about the *jimadores*, the people that extract the agave cores in the first steps of tequila production (CPTM, n.d.-a).



Figure 6.4. José Cuervo Express transports tourists from Guadalajara to Tequila (Copr. by Mundo Cuervo)

In contrast, Tlaquepaque (also known as San Pedro Tlaquepaque) is a town subsumed within Guadalajara's urban sprawl. It is mainly known for its music, festivals, events, galleries and local artisans. Tlaquepaque means 'place above clay land' in Nahuatl language, and along with the communities of Toluquilla, Zalatitán, Coyula, Tateposco, Tapechi (Tepetitlán), Tequepepan, and Tonalá, was originally part of a kingdom reigned by a woman named Cihualpilli Tzapotzinco. It was mainly inhabited by the Tonaltec people until the arrival of the Spaniards in 1530 (Tlaquepaque, n.d.-b). The town of Tlaquepaque officially joined the Magical Towns programme in 2018 being one of the latest towns in joining the programme when this study took place.



Figure 6.5. Photographs of Tequila's main square and name sign (left) and Santiago Apostol parish church (right) (by author, 2019).

In Tlaquepaque, most tourism focuses on food, drink, music, and handicrafts. Tlaquepaque offers a series of museums and galleries that display the work of the people who have traditionally created such artwork for generations. Some of the main attractions include the Regional Museum of Ceramics, the Pantaleón Panduro museum, El Refugio Cultural Centre, El Parián restaurant court, Hidalgo garden (see Figure 6.6), San Pedro parish church, Nuestra Señora de la Soledad sanctuary, and the Independencia pedestrian street full of galleries and artisan shops (see Figure 6.7) (Tlaquepaque, n.d.-a). For stakeholder Teq9, one of the unique characteristics of Tlaquepaque is that it allows meeting authentic Mexico by having direct contact with average working-class Mexicans in their workshops, unlike Tequila, which presents itself in a very Disneyfied and modern way (see section 6.2.3). However, in both towns, representations of Mexican culture are often misused and overexploited to fulfil the tourist gaze.



Figure 6.6. Photograph of Tlaquepaque's Hidalgo garden main square (left) and Tlaquepaque's name sign (right) (by author, 2019).

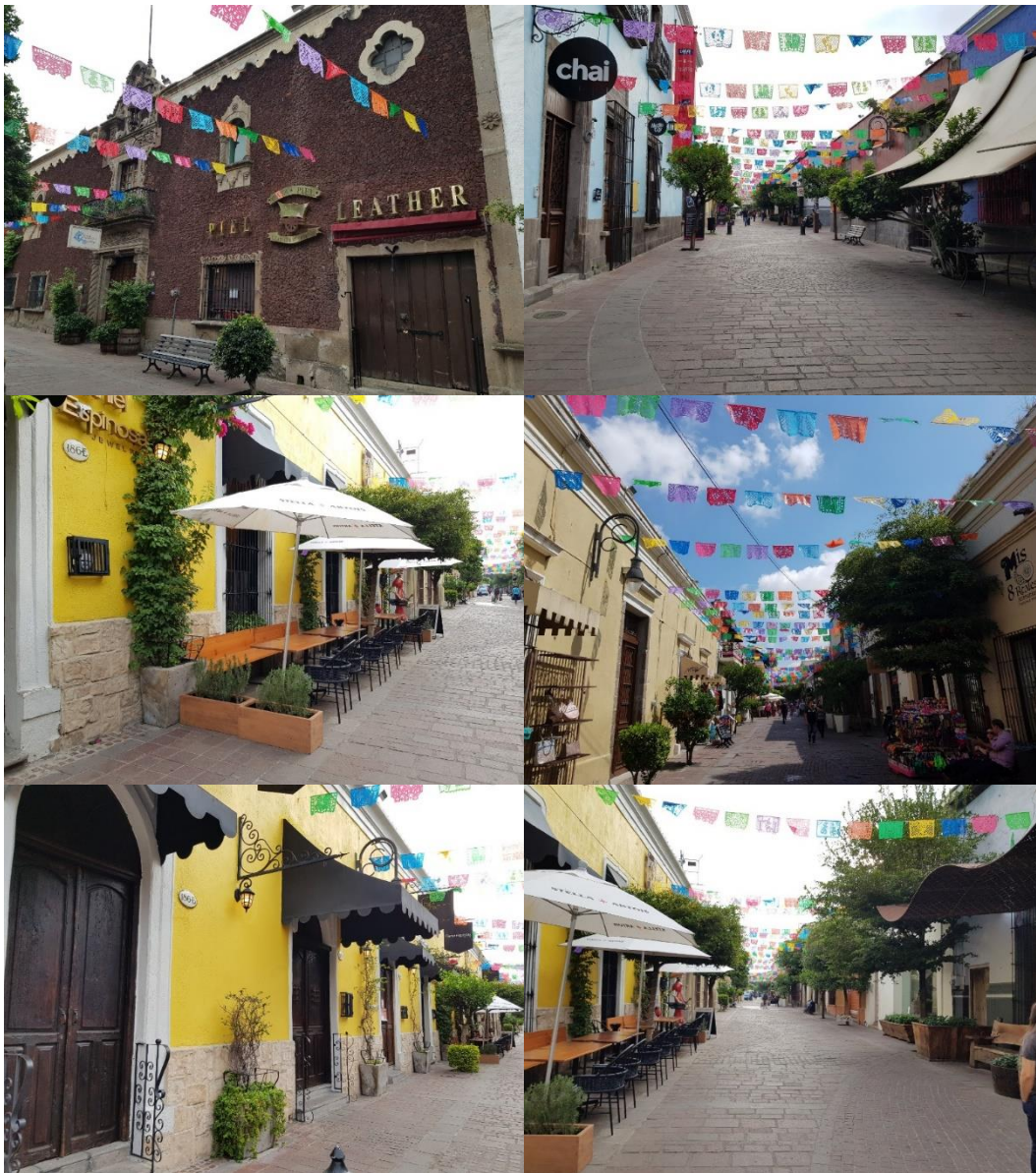


Figure 6.7. Photographs of Independencia Street in Tlaquepaque (by author, 2019).

In the opinion of stakeholder Tla9 (a local hotel owner and street artist), Tlaquepaque is not a Magical Town for its architecture but for its artisan heritage. Tlaquepaque was originally a country holiday spot for wealthy people that lived in Guadalajara. The old houses that today are galleries, cafés, restaurants, and shops were summer houses in the 1700s and 1800s. There are, however, plenty of places with older and better-preserved Spanish architecture and tangible heritage in other parts of Mexico. Stakeholder Tla7 (a US-American who owns a boutique hotel), people's instant response to highlight Tlaquepaque's architecture and food is wrong. In their words, 'you can find good architecture and food in many other places in Mexico'. Instead, the 'magic' of Tlaquepaque 'lives in the centuries-old folk art that's indigenous and famous to this area and has been since pre-Columbian times', something that beach resorts like Puerto Vallarta cannot offer:

There's probably more in the designated Magical Town than there is, for instance, in Puerto Vallarta. Puerto Vallarta is an international destination. What are they selling? They're not selling Mexico! They're selling sun, sand, and surf, and there's a lot of sun, sand, and surf in the world. What's unique to Mexico is Mexico. So, I think we're a lot more Mexican and have a lot more traditions than Puerto Vallarta or Acapulco or a number of other coastal areas that frankly were the first promoted areas.

According to stakeholder Tla9, there are more than 300 artisan workshops in Tlaquepaque's centre alone. The town is subdivided into four barrios (i.e. districts or quarters), each of them with its own craft. For instance, San Francisco makes human-like figures of celebrities, politicians, nativity sets, and dolls with materials like clay or papier-mâché. Santa Maria makes ceramics such as plates and jugs, and San Juan and Santo Santiago make planters and pots. To integrate said tradition into tourism, stakeholder Tla9 gives guided visits to the workshops of local artisans, where visitors can learn about the creation process.

Stakeholder Tla9 also leads artistic and cultural projects like *Puertas Mágicas* (Magical Doors) and *Mono Barro*. The *Puertas Mágicas* project is an artist collective that alters doors with street art (see Figure 6.8). When visitors scan them with their mobile phones, the artworks become alive in AR, providing a virtual experience. Similarly, the *Mono Barro* project consists of hiding tiny clay figures in different places in the town (see Figure 6.9). When found and scanned using a mobile phone, the figures tell historical information and spooky stories related to past events in Tlaquepaque. Stakeholder Tla9 said that Mexico is full of imagery based on Posada's La Catrina and Frida Kahlo's self-portraits, and Tlaquepaque needs to find and value its own identity, iconography, colours, and art. These projects aim to give visibility to artisans and artists while encouraging interaction and communication between stakeholders and expanding the tourist activity beyond the Magical Town designated area.

There are different reasons why people visit Tequila and Tlaquepaque. For some, the towns are stopover destinations while having a more extended holiday, such as a road trip, on their way to a beach holiday, or visiting Guadalajara for an event or a business meeting. For stakeholder Teq5, Tequila is in a strategic position as it is located between two main destinations, Guadalajara and Puerto Vallarta. Likewise, Tlaquepaque's position, at a short distance from Guadalajara's city centre and a 20-minute drive from the International Airport, makes it an ideal activity when visiting Guadalajara or having a layover. Stakeholder Teq9 (an experienced local tour guide) said that people tend to see Tlaquepaque as a complement to Guadalajara. In their opinion, nobody buys a flight to visit Tlaquepaque exclusively, but many people, particularly tequila aficionados, organise their trip to visit Tequila exclusively. However, stakeholder Tla5 (a boutique hotel manager) said that many international visitors go to Tequila on a day trip and prefer staying in Tlaquepaque to be closer to the city and the airport.



Figure 6.8. The Puertas Mágicas (Magical Doors) project mixes street art and AR technology in Tlaquepaque (by @puertasmagicas.mx Instagram account).

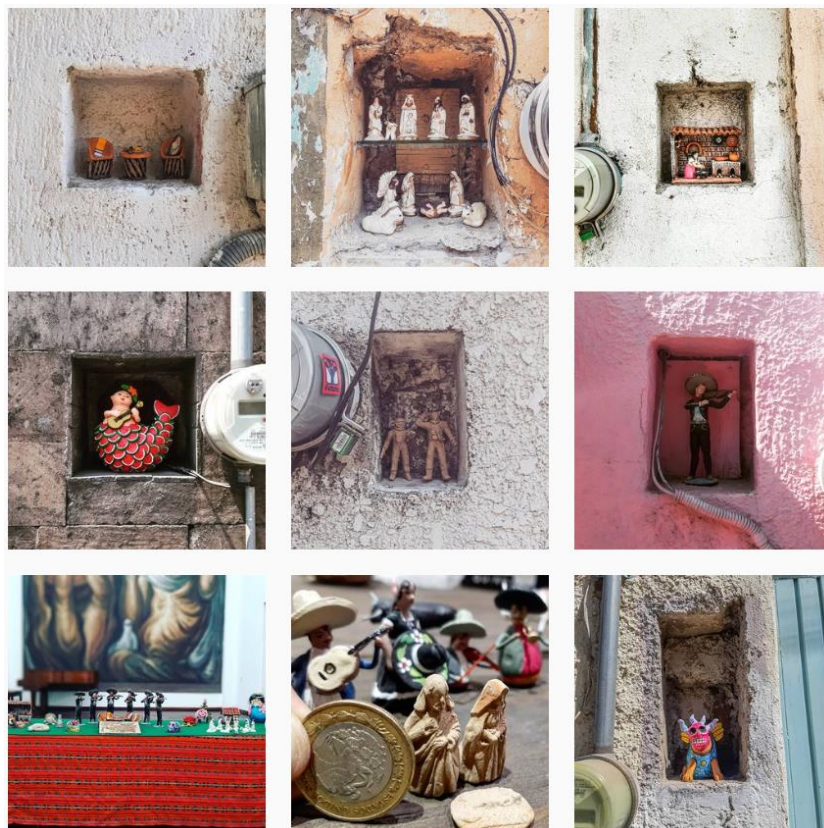


Figure 6.9. The Mono Barro project revalorises Tlaquepaque's clay artisan heritage (by @monobarro Instagram account).

Both Tequila and Tlaquepaque incorporate some common cultural elements of the mestizo identity (such as mariachi music and tequila) that are considered part of *lo mexicano* and are endemic of this region. However, they intend to differentiate themselves on two levels. First, they present themselves as different and outstanding from all the non-Magical Towns and sea-side destinations in Mexico, and second, they differentiate themselves from each other and the rest of the Magical Towns. Agreeing with González and Castañeda (2014), they seem to do so by highlighting the unique attributes and visual elements of their heritage. On the one hand, Tequila capitalises on all things related to the tequila drink. On the other hand, Tlaquepaque tries to incentivise the promotion of their artisan heritage. Tlaquepaque faces a bigger challenge since most people wrongly appreciate its architecture and ‘Mexican atmosphere’, which is easily replicable in other places, such as San Miguel de Allende. Therefore, Tlaquepaque needs to capitalise on its artisan heritage more and promote what truly makes it unique.

6.2.2 Magical Town designation

The project of transforming the town of Tequila into a destination has always been corporate-driven. According to stakeholder Teq7 (a tequila connoisseur and current Director of the Beckmann Foundation), Juan Beckmann Vidal, a billionaire owner of José Cuervo tequila, was one of the key figures in the process. He set up a sustainable model to boost employment opportunities and benefit the region economically. Tequila did not meet many of the current requirements to become a Magical Town, but Juan Beckmann was confident of Tequila’s potential to become an important tourist destination due to its history and culture. The process started in 1998, when the Secretariat of Tourism implemented its urban image programme, a predecessor of the Magical Towns programme (see section 4.6). Beckmann set up a Trust, to which the main contributions came from José Cuervo tequila. With those funds, the town started to have essential maintenance, painting building façades, improving signage, installing underground wiring, and eventually applying to become a Magical Town. The Trust’s political and economic influence pressured the local government and business owners to support the project, intending to replicate the European wine industry destinations model.

Similarly, the private sector has led Tlaquepaque’s tourist activity. Tlaquepaque tried to qualify for its Magical Town designation on more than one occasion. Stakeholder Tla4 (a civil servant who was involved in the application process) and stakeholder Tla9 said that the idea was initially presented to the Secretariat of Tourism by the local civil society and local business owners about 12 years ago. However, they lacked support from the local government. It was not until several years later that the civil society understood that they had to work with the local

government in a joint effort. The local government took the lead a few years later, taking advantage of the requirements changes and obtaining the Magical Town designation in 2018. Stakeholder Tla4 said:

I was already engaged in the economy and tourism activities, but from a business point of view. So, the initiative seemed very good for us, but we didn't partner with the local government, which is essential for this designation. So, time passed by, and there was no communication with the succeeding local governments until almost five years ago, when I became a public servant, and we tried again. Based on our previous experience, I was invited to make the proposal again, but now as the Director of Tourism in the local government. The programme's operating rules had already been modified, and although there was no call for applications, we worked following the previous one so we could meet all the criteria before they released a new call. We integrated a file developing a three-year tourism development programme supported by citizen and business commitments and the local chamber of commerce collaboration.

For stakeholder Tla2 (a local merchant and former politician), two main issues prevented Tlaquepaque from obtaining its designation sooner. Firstly, the town is bigger than most Magical Towns, it is subsumed within Guadalajara's urban sprawl, and it did not fit in the 'small towns' concept that the programme was following at the time. Secondly, the town is very modern. The latter is still an issue that several stakeholders reported. In the past, the locals had a negative attitude towards all traditional things in Tlaquepaque as they considered them 'old-fashioned', 'outdated' or 'underdeveloped'. They started modernising the town with new buildings that were seen as 'modernity and progress' while many old buildings were neglected, demolished, or modernised. Stakeholder Tla2 said:

We spent many years trying to qualify for the programme. We first tried to apply as a group of citizens, but we failed, and after that, the local government reapplied and kept insisting several times. The main problem was that the town has... I don't know... more than 500 thousand inhabitants, and we could not participate, to start with. We also failed the inspections because we have many modern buildings, and we lack a uniform traditional style. Then, as soon as changes in the programme allowed us to apply, we could only register an area of forty-odd blocks, which is the part that remained as a Magical Town.

Tlaquepaque was already positioned as a destination before its Magical Town designation. That was a significant advantage over other Magical Towns as the infrastructure was already there, including hotels, museums, galleries, shops, cafés, and restaurants. Unlike Tequila, in Tlaquepaque, the programme did not cause much disruption as most people in the designated area were already used to welcoming tourists every day. There are not many residents in the

centre as most of it is a commercial area. Its location close to Guadalajara (one of Mexico's major cities), and a 20-minute drive from an international airport, made it the perfect tourist spot. Stakeholder Tla6 (a tour company owner and tour guide) said that Tlaquepaque has long attracted international tourists (mainly from the US) interested in handicrafts and cultural tourism. They also already had links with Guadalajara's tourist industry, with tours running from the city to the town. In that regard, stakeholder Tla4 said that they did not see the Magical Towns brand as a way of bringing tourism but strengthening it:

International visitors to Tlaquepaque were already coming long before the designation. We didn't see the brand as an opportunity to bring this type of tourism but to strengthen it. We already had that market interested in handicrafts and Tlaquepaque. What we had to do was to enter the Magical Towns programme to design a tourism management platform different from the one we had. That means there was a lot to do with ordering of the public space, heritage preservation guidelines... that is, to begin to take care of our tangible heritage... and (...) to put order and reinvent ourselves on services, quality, certification, promotion, and of course it gave us the possibility of investing more in our town.

There are, however, voices against the Magical Town designation in Tlaquepaque. A handful of stakeholders said that Tlaquepaque did not deserve such designation or were unsure why Tlaquepaque obtained it. There were concerns that many other towns around Mexico genuinely deserve the designation, and the programme could be more beneficial for them. For stakeholder Tla5, the programme helps attract people to towns that need economic activity, and Tlaquepaque did not need to attract more visitors as they have been a well-known destination in the area for many years. Stakeholder Tla5 said that the programme initially aimed to help towns that only needed an extra boost that would help them rescue their culture and heritage and stand out to attract visitors. It was an opportunity for towns that already had their own identity, architecture, and heritage, but the fact that many people in Tlaquepaque started painting their façades, refurbishing, and building new things was enough of a clue to know that the programme was not for them. That situation only reflected that instead of thinking of themselves as being a town rich in heritage, they saw the programme as a prize for making up their heritage. Stakeholder Tla5 commented:

Our main problem is that... (...) I can think of Tapalpa, which is a place where one goes, and all the houses look the same, there is the atmosphere of a mountain town, the only thing they have to do is preserve it, keep it orderly, keep it clean, whereas we don't know what to do. Every time we talk about Magical Towns I see uncertainty. We know that we have a long way to go to be a place that feels entirely preserved. If we have to start painting façades, thinking about which businesses are not complying with the

regulations, what the permitted colours are, etc. is a big problem because we are already in the programme. So, I do believe that if they come to check my town right now, they would take our designation away.

Up until the time when the interviews and the visit to Tlaquepaque took place, the programme had not properly taken off in Tlaquepaque. Their relatively recent designation was unnoticed by many as there had not been much change. Moreover, the programme was just taking off in Tlaquepaque when the Covid-19 pandemic hit Mexico, severely affecting the tourism and hospitality industry as they had to temporarily close their businesses and pause activities. Today, the town is still trying to recover, so it is hard to judge the programme's outcome.

6.2.3 Misuse and misrepresentation of local culture and heritage

The representations of Mexico in both towns tend to fall into stereotypes. Mexico is a mega culturally diverse country that has essentialised its national identity through distinctive elements found in the state of Jalisco. Tequila, mariachi music, *charrería* rodeos, and folk dances are found everywhere in both towns. These types of cultural elements are considered Mexican because they are associated with the mestizo identity. They all mix indigenous and Spanish traditions (see section 4.3), resulting in being neither Indigenous American nor Spanish but Mexican. Therefore, such mestizo cultural elements are taken as representatives of Mexican culture and often misused and overexploited in Tequila and Tlaquepaque to fulfil the tourist gaze and expectations.

The representation of the local culture had become Disneyfied. In Tequila, new buildings are being built in neo-colonial architectural styles that imitate the old traditional Mexican buildings instead of preserving the heritage and refurbishing the local architecture (see Figure 6.10). For stakeholder Teq9, the main challenge for Tequila is to stop being the world's largest cantina and the Disneyland of drunken people. Tequila should target the more specialised tourism of tequila aficionados, which is currently looking for alternative distilleries in the highlands, a region nearby that is part of the designation of origin but away from the tourists, commercial brands, and mainstream activities. Stakeholder Teq7 said that Tequila needs to keep addressing this issue:

We all need to take care of Tequila's heritage and not allow Tequila to become a huge cantina. It has to be a heritage city. We must become like La Rioja, like Napa Valley, where gastronomy with local ingredients, artisans, and responsible tasting and consumption of tequila is paramount.



Figure 6.10. Photographs of José Cuervo Street in Tequila, a pedestrian street part of the 'Mundo Cuervo' experience (by author, 2019).

In the Disneyfied Tequila, local culture, heritage, and traditions are commonly misrepresented. Stakeholder Teq9 highlighted that big corporations, like José Cuervo tequila, should listen to the local residents when developing representations of the local culture and traditions. They should ask the locals how they want to be represented and not just recreate assumed stereotypes because, in the end, it ends up caricaturing the local culture and heritage. Stakeholder Teq9 explained that there should be more communication with the residents to fully represent and reflect their culture, avoid misinterpretations, and not impose stereotypical elements to fulfil the tourist gaze.

They should be a little more sensitivity and ask people how they want to be represented. If we do the tourist version, what ends up happening is that people change their identity to satisfy the tourists. They change their own culture to make a little extra money, and, in the long run, the authentic culture gets lost. Everything becomes a montage. That's where Tequila is going to, a Disneyfication of tequila.

For some stakeholders, a way to solve this is by promoting more, and looking at the indigenous cultures. Stakeholder Teq3 (who had contributed to the local Department of Tourism and the National Museum of Tequila) said that the magic of Tequila is not in the town of Tequila. In their opinion, the magic of Tequila lives in the mountains, beyond the river Santiago, where isolated communities developed their cuisine based on native plants like agave and farm animals. The magic of Tequila is the people of Tequila. The people who had made and maintained the agave fields with their hands and hard work.

Similarly, stakeholder Teq9 thinks that the area is rich in indigenous traditions and cuisine. He mentioned that many restaurants are proposing new recipes with native ingredients. They are innovating by bringing local ingredients into modernised versions of traditional dishes to make them more attractive, raise awareness, and create an interest in indigenous cuisine, rescuing ingredients and preserving dishes that otherwise could get lost. Likewise, there is a growing interest in visiting Guachimontones, an archaeological site with a building that is slowly becoming ‘Jalisco’s pyramid’ (see Figure 6.11). He explained that the circular building is now bringing a sense of identity to Jalisco as it is gaining a place next to well-known sites such as Teotihuacan and Chichen Itza.



Figure 6.11. Guachimontones archaeological site (by Esteban Tucci 2011, CC BY-SA 3.0).

However, without its due recognition, there is always a risk of falling into cultural appropriation. Distilleries in Tequila, for instance, adapted the story of the Mexica (Aztec) goddess Mayahuel exploiting and twisting it for marketing purposes. Many Indigenous American groups, such as the Chichimeca, Otomi, and Toltec people, enjoyed drinks and food derived from agave plants (SECTUR, 2019d). For the Mexica people, Mayahuel was a deity associated with the agave americana plant (maguey) and the *pulque* fermented drink. However, its association with tequila is relatively recent. The story of Mayahuel was utilised as a founding or origin myth to legitimise the origins of tequila as an ‘authentic Mexican tradition’ when the tequila

industry sought to obtain the protected designation of origin in the 1970s, and the Tequila Regulatory Council popularised it in the 1990s. Mayahuel could not have been a sort of ‘ancient tequila goddess’ simply because tequila is produced from a different type of agave (blue tequilana Weber), and distillation processes were introduced by Spaniards in the 1500s (Gaytán and Zapata, 2012, p. 194), establishing the first tequila distilleries in the 1600s and becoming an industrialised process until the 1700s.

In Tlaquepaque, many street vendors and galleries sell handicrafts and art pieces that are not made in Tlaquepaque. According to stakeholder Tla2, many street vendors bring handicrafts from communities in neighbouring states and even sell products imported from China. Many of the old country houses that were transformed into commercial galleries are not owned by the artisans but by businesspeople who trade artworks. Therefore, many shops that supposedly sell local handicrafts sell souvenirs for tourists or artworks from other places, while the local artisans do not have a place to sell their products.

In Tlaquepaque, there is also a general feeling that they need to rescue what makes them unique. According to stakeholder Tla7, people should promote Tlaquepaque’s centuries-old artisan tradition by supporting folk art, visiting the artisans’ workshops, and prioritising selling local pieces. For stakeholder Tla5, Tlaquepaque needs to return to its origins and be a tranquil traditional town again: ‘(...) We have to go back to what once made us special but make it attractive so that the visitor feels comfortable entering a community that still has its festivities and traditions deeply rooted in religion’. Both agreed that modernity took away the uniqueness of Tlaquepaque, which is something they need to retrieve to succeed as a Magical Town (see section 6.2.1).

In both towns, the local restaurants and bars became windows to showcase Mexico’s culture and traditions. They offer variety shows of mariachi music and folk dances, and they are decorated with folk art and colourful banners and serve authentic Mexican food. All of that recreates an idealised ‘Mexican atmosphere’ using iconic elements that are part of the imagery associated with *mexicanidad* and *lo mexicano*. Nevertheless, these representations frequently fall into stereotypes and are easily replicable Disneyfications of Mexican culture. As addressed in section 6.2.1, both towns need to capitalise and promote more on their unique attributes. Tequila, should revalorise and focus on the agave-based local cuisine and Tlaquepaque in its centuries-old artisan tradition, promoting its artisans and their clay craft culture. Not only to individualise and differentiate themselves but to preserve the local culture and heritage and contribute to the construction of Mexico’s country image.

6.2.4 Names of the towns

Tlaquepaque has had name issues for many years. The area was originally named Tlaquepaque by the indigenous people, but for a few hundred years, Spanish settlers renamed it San Pedro, developing what is now the town's centre (and designated Magical Town area). Over time, people referred to it as San Pedro Tlaquepaque, but they dropped San Pedro after a prohibition that did not allow saints' names on public spaces in the state of Jalisco, and the name Tlaquepaque remained for the entire town. While outsiders knew the town just as Tlaquepaque, the locals kept calling the town's centre San Pedro. Stakeholder Tla2 explained that this situation still causes misunderstandings. For instance, when newspapers report bad news in 'Tlaquepaque', people immediately assume it happened in the town's centre (San Pedro), affecting their image and reputation. Stakeholder Tla2 also explained that people petitioned to change the centre's name to reinstate it as San Pedro, its original name, to differentiate it from the rest of Tlaquepaque. However, in a series of misunderstandings, the authorities changed the name of the whole town to its previous longer name, 'San Pedro Tlaquepaque', which still holds today.

Stakeholders in Tlaquepaque reported that all the locals keep referring to the town as San Pedro, while most visitors and outsiders know it as Tlaquepaque. Indeed, all the tourism promotion and popular culture always refer to it by its unique name: Tlaquepaque. The name is well-known among domestic visitors and makes the town stand out. San Pedro is an extremely common name for towns in the Spanish-speaking world, whereas there is only one Tlaquepaque in Mexico. This gives the town an advantage in branding and promotion.

In the case of Tequila, its name also gives the town a considerable advantage. They have the great privilege of capitalising on their name. The word Tequila is well positioned among the public as most people have heard of the drink, including potential visitors who have never been to Mexico (see section 8.2.4). It awakens an interest in the town because they associate it with the drink (which also serves as the main attraction in the town) and get surprised by learning there is a town called Tequila. Tequila is a more memorable name than Tlaquepaque. It is short and easier to pronounce for anglophones. Tlaquepaque is a longer name. It has many repeated vowels, is harder to pronounce for anglophones, and has no association with anything relatable. Tlaquepaque is more difficult to remember as it does not mean anything to potential visitors.

6.2.5 Professionalisation

In recent years, Tlaquepaque has improved the quality of its services up to international tourism standards, with an increasing number of establishments offering information in English. For stakeholder Tla8 (a tour company owner and guide), the visitor centre is a great example. The

centre offers English information and free lockers for bags and belongings, which is unusual in other Magical Towns (see Figure 6.12). Stakeholder Tla3 (a restaurant owner) said their restaurant has English menus, and some staff members are bilingual. Additionally, they bring a table flag of the customer's country of origin to make them feel welcome. Another example is stakeholder Tla7, their hotel is very small, with only seven rooms, and therefore, their fees are double what a domestic tourist would like to spend. They cater to Anglo visitors (mainly from the US, Australia, and the UK) willing to pay for all the services provided. He tries to fulfil the needs he once had as a foreigner. He said that they focus, particularly, on women travelling solo:

(...) One of the things that we've noticed is that more women are travelling by themselves on business groups of ladies, so we cater to that market. For instance, we have an evening dessert which is another time for people to get together, we have a tea bar over here that's a courtesy, we have our little bar encouraging people to be Mexican, to have their big meal during the day. Often during the rainy season, for instance, it's pouring cats and dogs in the night, and you can't even get out, so you've had a big midday, a dessert in the evening, and a cup of tea and maybe a brandy afterwards, and that's one of the things a woman travelling by herself may not enjoy doing, particularly in an unknown area and not knowing the language, is going out at night by themselves etc. So, we work out to be like a low motel price in the United States for international guests. It is a value international guests could see, but national tourism couldn't.



Figure 6.12. Photographs of Tlaquepaque's visitor centre, which offers information in English and Spanish (by author, 2019).

However, the previously mentioned cases are more of an exception than a rule. Stakeholder Tla7 said their major concern is the lack of English information in museums and public services, which complicates his guests' visit. He thinks that this situation happens because the majority of the visitors are domestic tourists. Similarly, stakeholders in Tequila reported that the few people who speak English in Tequila do it because they either lived and worked in the US or learnt English as a second language at a local school. Hence, their English is not very good and

sometimes is informal and full of slang words. José Cuervo tequila is one of the few exceptions, as all its staff is fully bilingual and offers tours in English and Spanish.

Many other attractions and services (particularly public services managed by the local government) still need to improve. According to the stakeholders interviewed, Tequila's local government need to apply stricter regulations for informal commerce and urban image. Stakeholder Teq1 said that there is not a lack of regulations but a lack of compliance with those regulations. In Tlaquepaque, things are not any different. Many street vendors have overcrowded public spaces, and the local government is very tolerant in terms of urban image and informal commerce. Section 7.2.2.1. addresses this situation in more detail.

Having English widely spoken in Tequila and Tlaquepaque is a necessary step towards the internationalisation of the Magical Towns programme. English would not only meet the needs of US-American and British visitors but also serve as a lingua franca for visitors who speak other languages. It is expected that the more international visitors Tequila and Tlaquepaque receive, the more English information there will be available. Having English widely spoken in both towns would help improve their tourism industry's professionalisation.

6.2.6 Lack of tourist infrastructure

There is a lack of connectivity. The opportunity to attract tourists staying in Puerto Vallarta resorts sounds logical (see map in section 5.4) but is difficult to take. Other Magical Towns in the state of Jalisco, such as San Sebastián del Oeste, Mascota, and Talpa de Allende, take most of the international tourists from Puerto Vallarta because they are only about an hour away. Tourists going from Puerto Vallarta to Tequila or Tlaquepaque require taking a coach trip or renting a car for a long drive. Therefore, stakeholder Tla4 mentioned that their intention is positioning Tlaquepaque 'to become an extension of their stay'. They want to move from being a day-trip activity to being a more solid holiday complement: 'We want them to consider Tlaquepaque, not as a place to visit for a few hours but a place to spend two nights to have a good gastronomic experience, music, crafts and everything else'.

Stakeholders also reported that there are connectivity issues when going from Tlaquepaque to Tequila and vice versa. Tour companies and independent tourists have to get out of Tlaquepaque's centre and either cross through the city of Guadalajara or surround it, getting stuck in the traffic during peak hours. An inexperienced tourist could get easily lost driving in Guadalajara, and some of the best alternatives are the pre-arranged tours departing from Guadalajara and Tlaquepaque.

One of the best alternatives for visiting Tequila on a day trip seems to be José Cuervo Express. However, according to stakeholder Teq10, José Cuervo Express' tour is not a complete experience. He said that, unlike other passenger trains in Mexico, the José Cuervo Express is a mere one-way tourist attraction. Tourists taking it from Guadalajara to Tequila return to Guadalajara by coach and not on the same train as they would expect. According to stakeholder Tla6, such coaches returning to Guadalajara are usually followed by an ambulance because there is always someone drunk, feeling bad or dehydrated that needs medical attention. This situation undermines the quality of the tour and the expectations that visitors have about the experience.

Another problem is the lack of infrastructure for receiving large numbers of international tourists. Tequila receives many visitors, more than the number of visitors they can accommodate. Stakeholder Teq4 (a former Director of the local Department of Tourism) explained that having many visitors could be potentially dangerous and it causes many problems. They are always short of cleaning and security staff. They have to constantly clean public spaces as visitors constantly produce garbage and they have to regularly patrol busy areas as people can get very drunk on the streets and cause problems. Overtourism could be an important reason for not promoting Tequila.

Lastly, there was a reported general lack of willingness to improve the town's infrastructure to be more inclusive and sustainable. Stakeholder Teq10 reported that there is a general lack of ramps for mobility and accessibility on pavements and attractions, affecting disabled people and limited mobility. A popular glamping hotel, for instance, has no ramps to access the barrel-shaped cabins, and some old distilleries are stone-paved, making it difficult for disabled people to access these places. This situation is something that happens in both the public places and the private sector.

6.3 Visitors

The second identified theme cover aspects related to the tourists that visit Tequila and Tlaquepaque. It looks at the opinion of stakeholders regarding domestic and international tourists, their behaviour, and how they interact with the towns. This theme is, in turn, subdivided into two subthemes, namely, Domestic and international tourists and Tourists' behaviour. See Figure 6.13 for reference.

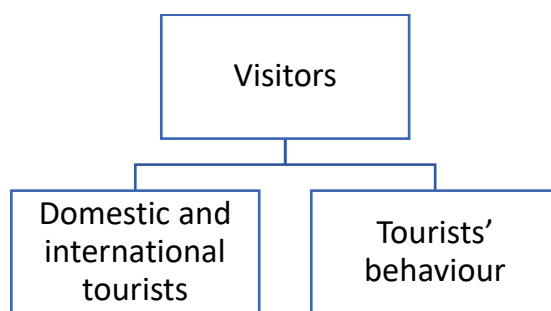


Figure 6.13. Thematic map of the theme Visitors.

6.3.1 Domestic and international tourists

According to the interviewed stakeholders, most of the visitors in both towns are domestic tourists. Tequila, Tlaquepaque and even the nearby town of Chapala have become popular day trips for domestic tourists visiting the area. Many international visitors to Tlaquepaque are people attending international events, conferences, and fairs hosted in Expo Guadalajara, an important convention centre. For stakeholder Tla7, one of the main types of visitors are people from the northern Mexican states that live a more Americanised lifestyle and often lack the cultural heritage associated with *lo mexicano*. They are interested in learning about Mexican traditions, seeing Spanish architecture, and visiting historical places. There is also more awareness about the Magical Towns programme and a bigger road-trip culture among domestic tourists. In a way, the Magical Towns programme is excellent for domestic tourists to discover their own country and connect with what they have been told is their culture.

However, stakeholder Tla5 said that domestic tourists rediscovered Tlaquepaque thanks to international tourists. Before Tlaquepaque developed its tourism industry and infrastructure, Mexicans were not appreciative of Tlaquepaque's artisan heritage. Stakeholder Tla5 said that very few Mexicans were interested in visiting the town, but since Tlaquepaque and the nearby town of Ajijic caught the attention of international tourists and became a hotspot for US-American and Canadian retirees, the interest in these places grew. International visitors and retirees started appreciating Mexican culture and all the natural beauty and culture found in the area by visiting Guadalajara and Tlaquepaque in their spare time. Consequently, the town started developing its famous atmosphere promoting mariachi music and rustic décor, becoming increasingly popular in the early 2000s.

The expenses and travel culture of domestic and international tourists are different. Stakeholder Tla8 said that domestic tourists are generally unwilling to spend money on cultural activities and only visit Tlaquepaque to get drunk at the local cantinas. Stakeholder Tla8 reported that domestic tourists always find their prices too expensive. In Tequila, domestic tourists are also found partying and getting drunk on the streets since the town is one of the few places in

the country that allows drinking in public. In contrast, international tourists are willing to spend more money and find cultural activities and tours affordable. For stakeholder Teq1, American and European visitors appreciate Mexican culture more. They leave Tequila happy and fascinated after enjoying the tours and tequila tastings. According to stakeholder Teq8, international tourists have read about tequila's distilling process and history. They know what to expect and are more conscious of their environmental impact. They like learning about the region's flora and fauna, and they contribute to the local economy. Stakeholder Teq8 said that having more international tourists than domestic ones is more convenient because they contribute more to the local economy with a lesser impact.

While there has been an increase in international tourists generally, all stakeholders agreed that most are from the US and Canada. Regional tourism is the main group of visitors after domestic tourists. In stakeholder Tla2's words, 'most of them are Americans... well... Americans from both Americas, the North and the South. Not so many Europeans or Asians, but yes, we always receive a few of them in my shop'. Many of them are retirees living in Jalisco or visiting Mexico for long periods during the winter. Others are of Mexican descent or have relatives in Jalisco. From South America, stakeholder Tla5 identified that they mainly come from Argentina, Colombia, and Peru. For stakeholder Tla7, the second largest group of international tourists are from the anglosphere, with Australia, the UK and New Zealand at the top. A third main group is from continental Europe, including Germany, Spain, Italy, and France. Stakeholder Tla5 also mentioned receiving sporadic visitors from the Czech Republic, Norway, and Sweden. Finally, a growing number of Asian visitors are coming from Japan, China, and India. Guadalajara has become the Mexican Silicon Valley, and many of them are moving to Mexico to work in hubs, clusters, and tech start-ups.

Tequila and Tlaquepaque are interested in attracting more international tourists. Since the majority of international tourists visiting the state of Jalisco stay in Puerto Vallarta, stakeholder Tla4 sees this as an opportunity to attract them to Tequila and Tlaquepaque. Stakeholder Tla4 said that the local government intends to consolidate a regional offer and develop strategic alliances with resorts in Puerto Vallarta:

There is an interesting number of European visitors, but we are not their first choice when they visit Mexico. When Europeans think of Mexico, they think of the beach, pleasant weather (...) and the Caribbean, and there are countless super cheap flights to the Caribbean, the Yucatán peninsula, and the Gulf of Mexico. It is more expensive to fly to the Pacific and the centre of the country. What I've seen recently, is that there are new charters with direct flights from London to Puerto Vallarta and that's where we could work with the RIU hotels offering new experiences.

However, the lack of connectivity addressed in section 6.2.6 and the distance between Puerto Vallarta and Tlaquepaque makes it difficult to achieve. Resorts and tour operators in Puerto Vallarta offer day trips to other Magical Towns that are closer to them. For instance, a trip from Puerto Vallarta to Tlaquepaque would require a long journey by coach or car. Thus, the Stakeholder Tla4's idea of selling Tlaquepaque as an extension of a holiday in Puerto Vallarta (as mentioned in section 6.2.6) is more plausible.

6.3.2 Tourists' behaviour

The way tourists interact and move within the town has changed over time. Stakeholder Tla2 mentioned that most visitors already have all their bookings made online and all their activities planned. Stakeholder Tla2 said that years ago, it was common for tourists to arrive in Tlaquepaque with a tour guide who showed them around. Although tour companies like Camina GDL still offer walking tours, this practice has been decreasing. For stakeholder Tla5, young people use their smartphones for everything. They find the map on their phones, and look at recommendations of where to go, what to do, where to eat and what to see. Stakeholder Tla5 said they organise all their tour from start to end, booking flights, accommodation, and transport before their trip.

Stakeholders in Tlaquepaque also recalled many tourists saying they found out about Tlaquepaque through social media. Stakeholder Tla10 said that many visitors find out about Tlaquepaque mainly by looking at Instagram pictures and reviews on websites like TripAdvisor. This technological adoption for tourism is not exclusive to domestic tourists as new technologies and platforms like Uber have improved tourists' mobility, particularly for those with limited Spanish. She said that since the creation of smartphones, it has become increasingly uncommon for tourists to ask for guided tours.

6.4 Conclusion

The transformation of Tequila and Tlaquepaque into tourist destinations has always been a corporate initiative. Tequila capitalises on the tequila-making process and other edible products derived from the agave plant and all the culture around it, and Tlaquepaque attempts to capitalise on its artisan tradition. Both towns live in a post-industrial reality where inhabitants adapted themselves to provide tourist services. Distilleries in Tequila, and clay workshops in Tlaquepaque, have become windows to each town's culture where tourists can visit and learn about the local culture. However, providing English information is essential for the internationalisation of Tequila, Tlaquepaque, and the Magical Towns programme in general. Both towns and

the programme should start using an English version of the brand in their promotional material to appeal to non-Spanish speakers. The towns need to develop more material and provide services in English to achieve effective communication with visitors, not only from English-speaking countries but from countries that speak other languages but can use English as a *lingua franca*. In a way, by encouraging bilingual staff, there will be a higher professionalisation of the tourism industry.

Mexico is an extraordinarily culturally diverse country whose national identity has been essentialised into a few cultural elements original from the state of Jalisco. These cultural elements share Indigenous American and Spanish origins resulting in a culture that is neither Indigenous American nor Spanish but Mexican, the *mestizo* identity addressed in Chapter 4. They are frequently over-utilised in Tequila and Tlaquepaque to create a ‘Mexican atmosphere’ and satisfy the tourist gaze. Particularly, tequila, mariachi music, *charrería* rodeos, and traditional folk-dance performances, which are part of those cultural elements, are prevalent in both towns.

However, the towns need to identify what makes them unique to differentiate themselves from the rest of the Magical Towns and the rest of the Mexican destinations. In both towns, representations of Mexican culture have become Disneyfied, particularly in Tequila, where new buildings follow neo-colonial architectural styles, attempting not to break the town’s visual harmony but presenting false representations of Tequila’s tangible heritage. There are, however, good initiatives in Tlaquepaque that attempt to find its uniqueness. For instance, the Puertas Mágicas and Mono Barro projects incentivise artisans and artists to promote their work creatively, incorporating technology such as AR on mobile phones. Mexico’s identity and branding are filled with imagery inspired by Posada’s *La Catrina* and Frida Kahlo’s self-portraits, often associated with *lo mexicano*, and towns all over the country replicate this imagery. Tlaquepaque must keep discovering but also appreciating its own identity, iconography, colours, and art. These initiatives seek to increase the visibility of artisans and artists while involving different stakeholders and extending the tourist area.

Chapter 7. The Magical Towns programme: stakeholders' perspectives

7.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the second part of a thematic analysis of the data collected through the 20 individual semi-structured interviews held with stakeholders in the Magical Towns of Tequila and Tlaquepaque. As described in the previous chapter and in Chapter 5, the interviewees made up a heterogeneous sample that included representatives of different areas related to tourism divided into five categories: public sector, hotels, restaurants, tour operators/guides, and merchants. The interviewees got assigned an identification name following the system explained in the previous chapter, which comprised the town's first three letters and their interviewee number (e.g. Teq1, Teq2, Tla1, Tla2, etc.). A complete list of stakeholders is available in Appendix H.

Although Four themes were identified during the analysis of the first data set (namely Destination, Visitors, Programme, and Communication, with respective subthemes), this second part focuses only on Programme and Communication. This analysis gives insights into the stakeholders' thoughts and perspectives towards their towns being part of the Magical Towns programme, their communication issues, and promotional activities. It looks at what is happening internally within the towns and the stakeholders' intentions before looking at the external perspectives of potential visitors in Chapter 8 and Chapter 9.

7.2 Programme

The first theme examines the Magical Towns programme and focuses on the stakeholders' opinions about its positive and negative implications. The theme is subdivided into two subthemes looking at the positive aspects of the programme and the negative aspects of its execution. The former is, in turn, subdivided into four subthemes: Private sector participation, Teamwork, Potential partnerships, and Brand usage rights. The latter is, in turn, subdivided into two subthemes: Mismanagement and Negative public opinion. See Figure 7.1 for reference.

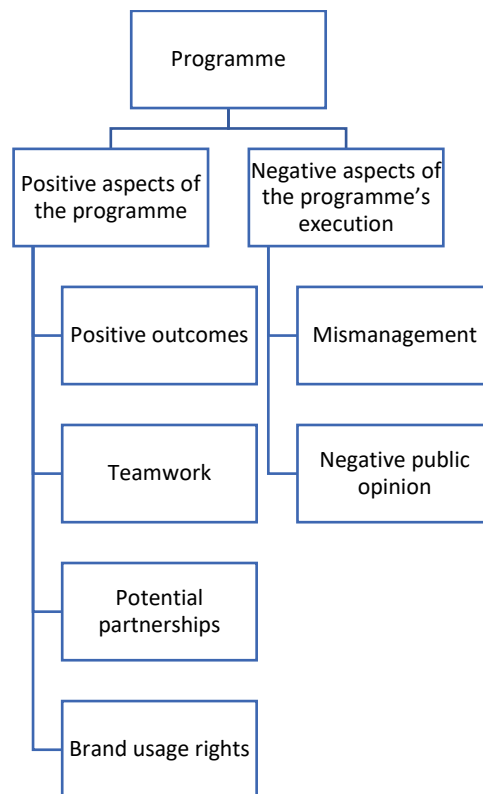


Figure 7.1. Thematic map of the theme Programme.

7.2.1 Positive aspects of the programme

This subtheme looks at the perceived benefits and positive aspects of the Magical Towns programme in Tequila and Tlaquepaque. It focuses on the stakeholders' opinions regarding the programme and its beneficial outcomes. It is in turn subdivided into four subthemes: Positive outcomes, Teamwork, Potential partnerships, and brand usage rights.

7.2.1.1 Positive outcomes

According to the interviewed stakeholders, the Magical Towns programme has greatly benefited many families and distilleries in Tequila, boosting the local economy. They reported that tequila had changed a lot since it obtained the Magical Town designation and that there is a perceived increase in the number of tourists arriving every year. The town has slowly developed tools and infrastructure for tourism. Telephone lines and other cables were buried, façades were painted, and the streets were refurbished, improving the town's urban image up to the standard required by the original aims of the Magical Towns programme. The town has slowly become a destination, and stakeholders have learnt on the way.

According to stakeholders, up until a few years ago, people visited Tequila mainly to party and get drunk on the streets. Although this still happens, stakeholders said that the combined effects of the Magical Town designation and other international and national initiatives like

being inscribed as a UNESCO World Heritage property (2006), the development of the Tequila Trail, and the train tours running from Guadalajara (see section 6.2.1) combined to make the town a cultural destination. Tequila now has a solid tourist infrastructure, but it needs to integrate the community more in the decision-making process to consolidate a destination focused on culture and tradition.

As part of the cultural offer, there is also cultural interchange with other Magical Towns. In Tequila's central plaza, Papantla's flying men, an indigenous ceremonial dance where dancers hang from a very tall pole, have a constant show every hour. At first, this was a bit conflictive because they are not originally from the state of Jalisco, and it is not even a local tradition, but for stakeholder Teq5, this is an excellent opportunity for cultural interchange. In stakeholder Teq5's opinion, if international visitors cannot visit Papantla (527 miles away, in the state of Veracruz) or any other major city where the flying men showcase their abilities, they can at least appreciate it in Tequila as part of their wider Mexican experience.

In Tlaquepaque, they have also become more cultural. Restaurants and cafés are also spaces for showcasing folk dances and music, as they present variety shows in the afternoons. For many stakeholders, Tlaquepaque represents a sample of authentic Mexico, where the essence of *lo mexicano* is represented. The use of colourful elements such as *papel picado* decorative banners, clay figures, traditional clothing, murals, and other expressions of art, bring a 'Mexican atmosphere'. This, however, often leads to misrepresentations that undermine regional differences. Artistic initiatives like *Puertas Mágicas* (see section 6.2.1) bring more street art and culture to the town, attempting to find Tlaquepaque's own identity and iconography to stand out from the rest of the country. Stakeholder Tla7 tries to revalorise and promote the work of local artisans and artists:

I was just so amazed that Mexico wanted to sell sun, sand and turf, glass, and chrome, and I wanted to sell Mexico (...) well how wonderful is that and all our neighbours are folk artists, so we organise tours to visit folk artists' homes, we have a little folk-art gallery, and take them to visit markets.

Although stakeholders reported that most of José Cuervo's promotion and tourist activities target the international market generating large amounts of profit for themselves, during the interviews, a common phrase repeatedly came up from the stakeholders in Tequila: 'if it rains, we all get wet'. Through this analogy and popular saying, stakeholders expressed that even when the big distilleries get most of the benefit of having tourism in the town, they still get benefitted in some ways. Since big distilleries like José Cuervo tequila have the resources to attract visitors to their factories, tourists also consume locally and contribute to the town's

economy. The average visitor also takes tours in the town, buys food and drinks in the local market and restaurants, tips a local band to play live music, stays at a locally owned Airbnb, and buys souvenirs. Stakeholder Teq6 (a tour company owner) said:

They (José Cuervo tequila) always have a full house. They can't take every visitor, nor can all visitors afford their prices. Let's say, speaking of the hotel, not all the people have the \$180 dollars per night to stay in that hotel, so all the rest of us are going to benefit from the tourist who got Cuervo's advertising and came to Tequila but can't afford \$180 per night. They're going to spend \$50, they're going to stay at a modest hotel. They are not going to spend \$75 dollars on a gourmet dinner, they are going to go to small cafés, to the local restaurants. Some of them might take the tour inside the factory but would also want to know the town's history and take a tour in the centre.

This situation has benefited the residents by generating employment and reducing migration. On the one hand, employment has brought a perceived better level of wellness to the town. In stakeholder Teq9's words, 'people are very happy because from working in the agave fields now young people work in tourist services and obviously have access to education, a better quality of life'. On the other hand, there is also a perceived lower level of migration to the US. Young people used to undertake a long journey to the US looking for better opportunities, and now, they are finding jobs in their town. Those who once moved to the US are returning as they are now fluent in English, a highly valuable skill in Tequila. Stakeholder Teq6 said:

I remember when I left high school, the dream of all boys was to migrate to the United States to work, and now... now it is a very curious phenomenon because most of them have returned, and they are the ones who speak English, who work in the sector... because that is also another weak point, we do not have enough bilingual people. So, there is no longer a big need for migration because now we have a good source of employment here. Our children, grandchildren, or relatives no longer need to move to Guadalajara, Mexico City or anywhere else. Now they can work here because there is a lot of industry, many restaurants opened, many hotels, Airbnbs, tour guides, and many car parks were opened. People probably have not perceived the benefits as such, except for those of us who are completely immersed in the tourist industry, but there is a better economy in the town, the shops sell more.

The benefits are yet to be seen in Tlaquepaque, as its designation was recently acquired. However, there is a clear acknowledgement that the programme can bring many positive benefits for everyone, not just for the business elite. Unlike Tequila, where most of the industry is dominated by distilleries, in Tlaquepaque, most businesses are local, small, and medium enterprises. For stakeholder Tla10 (a tour company owner), it is just a matter of teamwork because everyone depends on everyone in the tourism sector: 'We can all benefit from the programme,

it is just a matter of making an effort. If we don't make an effort, it will look like the benefit is for a few, but the reality is that it benefits all of us since we are a chain of services'.

7.2.1.2 Teamwork

The lack of public economic resources and the public sector bureaucracy has galvanised the local business community into action. When President López Obrador took office in 2018, he established austerity policies and budget cuts in many government departments, including the Magical Towns programme (see section 4.6.1). This situation brought times of uncertainty for all the towns in the programme, but they eventually learnt to carry on without public economic resources. Many of the events in Tequila started being organised and funded by the distilleries and tour operators themselves. The local Department of Tourism said that often there is no funding for events, but they always find a way to keep activities going. Stakeholder Teq4 mentioned strong coordination between the service providers, the distilleries, and the locals to carry out their events. They rely on the sponsorship of distilleries, who contribute with money or bring their stalls to the central plaza, demonstrations, tequila tasting, and other activities. Stakeholder Teq1 said that, in his opinion, they have learnt to do more with less, and surprisingly, business owners have started to contribute and engage even more than when they had federal resources:

The small and medium-sized enterprises are being much stronger and more vigorous to achieve what has to be achieved. For example, right now at the *Tianguis Turístico*, we got organised quicker and better, and even the State Government, for the first time, offered financial support for transport. We are becoming more productive with fewer resources than when we had all the resources. Tequila... locally... small businesses, including myself... we are the ones who participate more in local promotion.

Without a federal Magical Towns budget, the challenge for both towns is to learn to work in a partnership between the local administration and the private sector. Both parts should develop conjoined efforts where the public administration fulfils the private sector's needs and vice versa. On the one hand, the union of business owners is very strong, and they materialise many projects that the public administration cannot do alone. That attracts investors, brings more visitors, and encourages a more solid tourist industry. On the other hand, the public administration has access to infrastructure resources and planning, which helps in having orderly growth and a shared vision. Therefore, they must learn to work together and create alliances with other towns.

7.2.1.3 Potential partnerships

This region of the state of Jalisco has the potential for integrating several towns in a multi-destination package or partnership. The recent development of a new high-speed motorway from Puerto Vallarta to Guadalajara will shorten the driving time to only two hours and forty-five minutes, potentially increasing the affluence of tourists to Tequila and Tlaquepaque. However, it is still a significant distance for a day trip visit. For that reason, stakeholder Tla4 proposes a multi-destination tourism product that could extend international tourists' visits to Puerto Vallarta, complementing it by spending a few nights in Tlaquepaque (see section 6.2.6). Said multi-destination product could also target international visitors landing at Guadalajara's international airport without intentions of going to a beach destination.

The Tequila Trail, for instance, is an excellent example of integrating surrounding towns. The trail stops at different towns and villages, part of the designation of origin and the agave landscape region. Nearby towns, such as El Arenal, Amatitán, and Magdalena get benefitted from Tequila's fame and success, attracting visitors that stop by. It has consolidated a themed multi-destination activity for road-trippers and an excellent opportunity for visitors to explore the area beyond Tequila (see section 6.2.1).

In the case of Tlaquepaque, the tourist industry has excellent relationships with Tequila, and for stakeholder Tla4, integrating Chapala (a nearby town on the shores of Lake Chapala) would benefit the three of them. Chapala recently obtained its Magical Town designation in 2020 through its village Ajijic, a community of US-American and Canadian retirees a few minutes away from the main town. The union of Tequila, Tlaquepaque, and Chapala (Ajijic) could unlock the region's potential and develop a stronger tourism industry. Stakeholder Tla4 said:

(...) We also have good commercial alliances with the town of Tequila and those that we intend to do with Puerto Vallarta and the area of Chapala. So, Chapala, Tlaquepaque and Tequila are three places that could easily convince people in England or any European country to visit the area and live a Mexican experience without considering a beach destination. (...) That would allow us to make this triangle of Magical Towns in the central region of the state of Jalisco, and we would all be close to the international airport. We also have very good roads for these three towns, and we can make a great rural tourism product of Magical Towns with these three.

This is a great opportunity to establish partnerships and make Tequila and Tlaquepaque more attractive. Particularly, this could benefit international visitors staying in Puerto Vallarta, as it would group the three Magical Towns and advertise them as a single tourist product., They can attract tourists as a region by sharing promotional material and making tourists feel it is worth visiting. However, they should be careful not to create another brand. Instead, they should stick

to the Magical Towns brand that is already positioned and take advantage of the designation that the three have in common.

7.2.1.4 Brand usage rights

One of the main benefits of being part of the Magical Towns programme is acquiring the right to use the brand. The Magical Towns brand obtained the Mexican Institute of Industrial Property recognition of being a famous brand as it is well-known among domestic tourists (Puga, 2017). However, as the survey results and focus groups suggest, the programme is generally unknown among international tourists (see Chapter 8). Several tour guides said that the few foreign visitors who recognise the brand are retirees living in Mexico, as they have visited a handful of other Magical Towns across the country and are familiar with the concept. Although many stakeholders mentioned being disappointed by the lack of resources, they acknowledged that beyond obtaining funding for infrastructure, the main benefit is being part of the programme as it gives them access to using the brand. The designation itself legitimises their town as worthy of visiting.

7.2.2 Negative aspects of the programme's execution

This subtheme looks at the perceived negative aspects of the Magical Towns programme in Tequila and Tlaquepaque. It focuses on the stakeholders' opinions regarding the programme and their negative experiences. This subtheme is, in turn, subdivided into two subthemes: Mismanagement and Negative public opinion.

7.2.2.1 Mismanagement

Stakeholders pointed out that the local government has neglected tourism, economic resources, and safety. In Tequila, stakeholders said that the local government had mismanaged everything about the Magical Towns designation. Stakeholder Teq8, who worked in Tequila's Department of Tourism for a time, said that when they joined the department, they realised that previous administrations had lost all of the Magical Towns programme documentation. Stakeholder Teq8 said that their major challenge in the Department of Tourism was to remake all the files from scratch and pointed out that the current local government still seems to lack essential documents they should already have, such as directories of service providers and online information about tourism in Tequila.

The reasons for such situations seem to be related to nepotism and corruption. Finding a cousin, brother, or sister-in-law of some influential local authority working in high-rank

positions is not uncommon in a small community such as Tequila. Stakeholders highlighted that there are people in the local government without the credentials and background for being in such positions. They spend two of their three years in office learning their job before being replaced in the next election. In Tlaquepaque, they have similar problems. Every three years, a new local government comes in and starts undoing everything the previous one did to redo it and claim that they are doing something to benefit the town. According to several stakeholders, local governments saw the programme as a way to obtain federal resources for infrastructure and improvements in their towns, which oftentimes ended up being used with populist political aims. Some other times, they receive the funds, but the improvements are never seen in the town. Either way, there appears to be generalised mistrust towards the people in charge.

Such distrust comes from the lack of transparency in both towns. Stakeholders expressed that they do not know how the local government takes decisions, the committee's plans, and how they manage resources. For stakeholder Tla2, there is a mix of hopelessness and fear of facing retaliation if they oppose or challenge the local government. Some stakeholders, however, hope for a better future and have a bold vision. For stakeholder Tla6, the programme is managed by politicians who only want to keep the money for themselves and do not look at a long-term strategy, so he suggested a 30-year plan where a trust could protect the resources. Stakeholder Teq1 agreed with the idea of having a long-term vision where the public and private sectors can work together. For him, that should include having people with the right experience and skills in charge:

The Magical Towns should have clear standards and expectations regarding municipal agents. It is inconceivable to me that in these ten years, with Tequila's projection, we don't have a competent person in our Department of Tourism and an alignment with the Department of Economic Promotion. It is essential to be able to grow orderly. So, if we don't have a good economic relationship with tourism development, we can't have an orderly, systematic and autonomous wealth generation. That is one of the great failures that Tequila has. They haven't wanted to change because they continue putting political positions that don't have a vision for the development of the destination. We could generate perhaps 25% more than what we are generating, but we stay on a flat plateau.

However, these problems are not uncommon in the Magical Towns programme. According to stakeholder Teq9, many other designated towns have similar problems. In his experience, there is always a suspicion of corruption. The local committees are always seen as elitists as they are indeed frequently controlled by a small group of people looking after their own benefit:

(...) It is something that I've noticed in Tequila and other Magical Towns. I did a study in Huautla de Jiménez, Oaxaca, an indigenous community, and they have the same

problems, a local tourism elite linked to the local or regional political powers gets involved in the Magical Town committee. In the end, the local people don't even know what the committee is doing. They have no idea how resources are spent, so they reproduce the same narrative. That happens in Tequila, it happens in Huautla de Jiménez, it happens in Tlaquepaque.

Said lack of transparency, elitist practices, and corruption allegations are not isolated cases. Madrid (2014, p. 273) and Chavez and Rosales (2015, p. 44) reported that in the programme's first 13 years, the local Magical Towns committees had no mechanisms to control the budget, and they exposed the local governments' weakness in managing tourist destinations. The local committees were not required to make their information public, they were limited to having ten voting members, and the committees' chairpersons usually had the arbitrary power to decide who could join (see section 4.6.6). Although the programme has undergone two restructuring processes ever since, these problems, suspicions, and practices seem to continue.

By having an elite controlling the local Magical Town committee in both towns, some stakeholders said they do not feel represented. In Tequila, for instance, as expected, the committee is dominated by the business elite of the tequila industry. Trade unions in Tequila, unfortunately, do not elect their representatives in the committee. Most of them have a *de facto* representative, which in many cases, is the most powerful and influential person in their trade or the one with the biggest assets. For stakeholder Teq5, companies offering bus tours are the only well-organised union that votes for their representatives.

Similarly, in Tlaquepaque, the committees are very closed groups commonly involved in politics. The official (and supposedly independent) Magical Towns committee is highly influenced and managed by the local government. For many stakeholders, that committee only exists on paper as it does not do much. In contrast, a truly independent committee organised by businesspeople takes most of the initiative in organising everything themselves and constantly communicates through WhatsApp groups. However, they have also been accused of being elitists. For stakeholder Tla6, if someone is not part of their clique or shares similar ideas, they are automatically out:

From what I've seen, the people who belong to this group own hotels, restaurants, and galleries. They invited me to participate in one of their events, but it was the only time they invited me, because if you don't belong to their group, if you don't have money, if you aren't sociable, if you don't try to look good, and bootlick politicians, they don't invite you to join. This Magical Towns thing is 100% elitist.

Having the wrong people in power and an elitist committee hinders compliance with regulations as such people only look after their own interests. The programme provides an excellent

opportunity to regulate urban image and informal commerce, but they remain a constant problem in both towns. For stakeholder Teq1, there is not a lack of regulations but a lack of implementation of such regulations. In stakeholder Teq1's opinion, there is a lack of maturity in the local community. They need to understand that they have to comply with the regulations. That is partly due to the lack of good administration, good leadership, and professionalisation (see section 6.2.5). In Tequila, it appears that many informal businesses do not comply with the regulations and risk visitors' safety. For stakeholder Teq2, one of the fundamental problems is that they all know each other. It seems like the local authorities do not want to disturb formal and informal businesses, as they are often their relatives or lifelong friends. They do not want to ruin their friendships and relations due to being in a local government position that lasts only three years.

In Tlaquepaque, they face similar problems. Many handicraft street vendors have overcrowded public spaces and do not respect the urban image and authenticity regulations. For stakeholder Tla2, the local authorities know about these problems, but she sees much tolerance from the inspectors that look after the street markets. She said that when she was a representative in the local state congress, they passed a law so that each town in Jalisco had a dedicated space for artisans selling local products only. However, towns like Tlaquepaque granted permits free-for-all, and there is no committee looking after the authenticity of the crafts sold. She recalled an occasion when they tried removing all those sellers who did not comply with the regulations, such as specific stall measurements, colours, and a standardised parasol. Some sellers called the Indigenous Communities Commission for protection, and they ended up allowing them to keep selling fake crafts. Stakeholder Tla2 said:

You can tell when an artisan makes what they sell because they only have one thing. When you see that they have painted plates, hats, pashminas, which aren't even Mexican, and other things at the same stall... if they sell ten different things, obviously, they are not artisans, they are traders.

Another significant mismanagement problem, not strictly related to the Magical Towns programme, is the lack of safety. Stakeholders from both towns revealed having safety concerns. Stakeholder Tla3 said that they have had 'incidents' happening inside and outside their restaurant and the surrounding area. There were reports of robberies of businesses, car theft, and mugging at night time, and they said that police cameras do not even work. For stakeholder Tla7, the main problem is corruption. Stakeholder Tla7 has often seen it when reporting incidents to the police, such as loud music in residential areas. Stakeholder Tla7 said: '(...) if you complain about some loud music going on at one in the morning, all you're doing is pointing

cops in the direction of where they can get their bribe'. Stakeholders also expressed concern about the occasional presence of drug cartels and organised crime at night time. Unfortunately, that is a problem on a national scale, and the conflicts have been present for over a decade. That situation puts people in danger, scares tourists, and severely affects the image and reputation of both destinations and the country in general. Stakeholder Tla6 recalled having tourists asking him about the situation:

For me, the biggest problem in Tlaquepaque is the lack of public safety. I don't know if you have talked to people, but often, they say that Tlaquepaque is a Magical Town because people and wallets disappear. That's Tlaquepaque's biggest challenge. The 90% of my clients always ask about drug traffickers and cartels. Some ask out of interest, and others out of genuine fear. They ask if it is safe to go to certain places and where they should avoid going. Some places outside of the touristy area can be a bit dangerous. In fact, the Jalisco Nueva Generación Cartel operates there. It is not a secret for the locals that the local government and the local police are very involved with them, but as long as tourists don't find out, everything is okay. I wonder how many more tourists would come to Mexico if we did not have that bad image and reputation... We would probably be in the Top 5 most visited countries because it is an issue that worries and stops many tourists. I have been mugged in the middle of a tour. It's very unfortunate, and we have to get rid of that image. That's the biggest challenge.

Stakeholder Tla6 asseveration is not far from reality. As a result of the War on Drugs, several motorways, especially in the border states, have been the scene of armed conflicts, kidnappings, and other illegal activities. In response, the US has issued repeated travel warnings advising its citizens to avoid certain Mexican states and, in some cases, not to go at all. Similarly, the UK's foreign travel advice on Mexico says that 'drug-related violence is a problem in Guerrero, Jalisco and Nayarit' (GOV.UK, 2022a). As indicated by stakeholder Tla6, this situation prevents many international tourists from visiting Mexico.

In Tequila, the safety concerns are more related to alcohol consumption. Stakeholders said that there are many accidents related to drinking and driving. Many people go to Tequila to party and get drunk on a day trip, and they can cause accidents on their way back to Guadalajara. This concern came particularly from tour guides, who are responsible for bringing groups of tourists back to the city and are afraid of car accidents. In their opinion, the authorities are doing little to nothing to help prevent these situations from happening.

All the problems mentioned in this subtheme negatively impact Tequila's, Tlaquepaque's, and Mexico's reputation. The local government should be more organised and consistent with laws and regulations. Regulating the informal economy and keeping the same standards of urban image, such as sticking to the same colour palettes and signage, give visitors a better impression of the towns. The Magical Towns programme should put in place more guidelines and

inspections to offer similar quality among different towns. Likewise, safety is important for protecting the visitors' experience and for the residents who deal with such issues daily. Unfortunately, it is not something Tequila, and Tlaquepaque can deal with alone.

The work should start by re-establishing the trust between stakeholders and the local administrations. There is a lack of communication and understanding, and there cannot be a partnership between both entities if there is no trust between them. A first step should include more direct and open communication between the local Department of Tourism and stakeholders by having recurring meetings with the independent Magical Towns local committees to inform them about plans, actions, and expenses. However, for this to really work, stakeholders should feel represented in the local committees, and all voices from the different sectors should be heard. There cannot be transparency if an economic or political elite control tourism in the towns.

7.2.2.2 Negative public opinion

Some aspects of the programme have negatively affected the public opinion. For some stakeholders, the programme has lost its meaning. Stakeholder Teq3 criticised that the programme was initially born to promote towns with unique characteristics and without coastal attractions, but rules changed over time and towns like Sayulita, located on the coast of the state of Nayarit, were allowed to join the programme. Moreover, several stakeholders highlighted that there are too many Magical Towns. They said that the programme should not have grown to over 80 or 100 towns, but there are currently 132. Having such a significant number of towns diminishes the designation and dilutes the Magical Towns brand, as the bigger the number of towns, the less special they become. As addressed in section 4.6, the original incentive for becoming a Magical Town was obtaining funds for infrastructure. However, since the programme halted funding public works, the motivations have turned around branding and tourism promotion.

Furthermore, tourism is very invasive for many residents of Tequila. The adaptation process has been challenging as their working routine has dramatically changed. Before becoming a destination, Tequila was a very tranquil town, and now its residents have changed their slow way of life to a more dynamic and overcrowded one. This situation generated many complaints. Workers and entrepreneurs have barely any time off as they receive visitors every day of the week. In the words of stakeholder Teq6: 'Tequila has been a victim of its own success'. For instance, during the Mexican Independence Day festivities, most locals prefer staying home than going out to celebrate. The only people who enjoy the celebrations are always the tourists. This situation has affected not only the city centre's residents but everyone, including those

living in areas not part of the Magical Town zone. For stakeholder Teq5, people away from the centre do not receive any money directly from the tourist, but all they get is traffic and noise:

Something strange happens, from Monday to Thursday, the centre is for the locals while Friday and Saturday the locals stay at home. So, I think the centre is a space that coexists with the two groups on different days of the week. If we talk about other neighbourhoods far from the centre, there is a total rejection because they do not see the direct benefits. They have their corner shops and live off what they sell in their neighbourhood. However, tour buses pass through their streets, cars are parked in their spaces, and there is noise, so they feel they are being invaded and are not benefiting. We, the people from the centre, tolerate it because that is what we live on at the end of the day. I'm telling you this because my family is one hundred per cent dedicated to tourism.

Similarly, the constant problem in Tlaquepaque is the lack of parking spaces and traffic. All car parks are always full, and the regular events in town create constant traffic chaos. For stakeholder Tla6, it is better to avoid driving in Tlaquepaque during weekends, and he said that most locals prefer spending the weekends out of Tlaquepaque. Unlike Tequila, in Tlaquepaque, most of the buildings in the centre are for commercial use, and many are not residential. It seems like few people live in Tlaquepaque's centre, as the owners of restaurants and cafés tend to be from Guadalajara or even from other states. That peculiarity and its proximity to Guadalajara generate more traffic and parking issues.

Finally, there is a negative perception among stakeholders that the benefits of tourism are not equal. Stakeholders in Tequila noted that most of the benefit goes to the big distilleries profiting from the town with luxurious experiences and the predominant Mundo Cuervo project. The project is Disneyfying the town by recreating a colonial atmosphere and creating a whole culture around the drink. It has transformed Tequila's town into a theme park-like product (see section 6.2.3). They are also the ones that organise many of the events in the town.

Similarly, in Tlaquepaque, the local artisans are not getting benefitted much. There are many imported crafts for sale on the streets, and many of the galleries in the main commercial areas belong to businesspeople. For stakeholder Tla7, some of the best artisans in the town are not even located in the designated Magical Town area:

The actual designation of Magical Town is only like a two and a half by three and a half block, so where I live and where I wanted to be as a hotel is in a typical neighbourhood not so typical in that all our neighbours are folk artists and craftsmen technically, we're outside of that area. Frankly, I think that's a tourism problem with Mexico that, frankly, you don't find some of the best Mexican food in the richest Mexican neighbourhoods, nor do you find the best Mexican folk art you often find them in more humble neighbourhoods, and everybody seems to be wanting to be shiny and bright, and you know sometimes the hidden treasure you have to look for a little bit, and it's not always in the

place you expect it. So that's a little disappointing that I don't feel that local folk artists are yet really reaping the benefits of the designation of Magical Town.

These situations have generated many complaints and a negative public opinion towards the Magical Towns programme among locals. For some stakeholders who see the benefits of the programme, such as stakeholder Tla8, these types of problems are 'part of being a Magical Town'. However, locals constantly complain due to the high prices they have to pay, the traffic, garbage, chaos and lack of parking spaces. Therefore, the approach to reverse the negative public opinion should include two main courses of action. On the one hand, the local administrations should solve the aforementioned problems to cover the population's needs. On the other hand, there should be stronger communication with the residents, informing the benefits of being included in the town and making people aware of how they are being impacted, transferring their hostility, prejudice, apathy, and ignorance to sympathy, acceptance, interest, and knowledge (see Jefkins, 1994).

7.3 Communication

This theme addresses different communication issues. It looks at the different levels of communication between stakeholders and their publics, addressing issues related to the promotion of the towns as cultural destinations, the Magical Towns brand, the use of 360-degree formats in both towns, the lack of awareness about the programme and the lack of communication among stakeholders. This theme is subdivided into two subthemes: Communication and promotion strategies and Communication problems. See Figure 7.2 for reference.

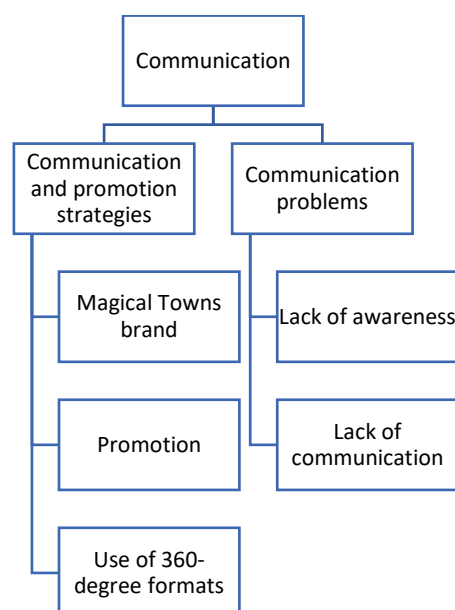


Figure 7.2. Thematic map of the theme Communication.

7.3.1 Communication and promotion strategies

This subtheme looks at the communication and promotion strategies that both public and private sectors have established to promote Tequila and Tlaquepaque as Magical Towns. It is, in turn, subdivided into three subthemes: Magical Towns brand, Promotion, and Use of 360-degree formats. The Promotion subtheme, in particular, looks at how both towns are being promoted, classifying the different types of media and strategies into two categories, namely ‘Paid and Owned’ and ‘Earned and Shared’. Such distinction is based on the PESO model, which categorises media channels based on the level of control organisations have over the messages (Dietrich, 2014).

7.3.1.1 Magical Towns brand

Stakeholders from both towns considered that using the Magical Towns brand is one of the programme’s best features. Although there were concerns regarding the recent budget cuts and lack of resources for the programme, stakeholders in Tequila acknowledged that having the designation and rights for using the Magical Towns brand is the most significant benefit. They said it is an identifier that gives them validation among visitors. Likewise, stakeholders in Tlaquepaque acknowledged the importance of using the brand. However, stakeholder Tla2 commented that Tlaquepaque did not need the Magical Town designation. In their words, ‘with or without the designation, Tlaquepaque was already a magical town’, referring to the town’s charming atmosphere. However, stakeholder Tla2 said that now that they have it, it is an excellent opportunity to increase awareness and attract visitors, as ‘if people did not know about Tlaquepaque, now with this new designation more people will’.

However, the adoption of the Magical Towns brand has been a slow process in both towns. According to stakeholder Teq6, Tequila was one of the first 20 towns to obtain its designation. Stakeholder Teq6 said that from the beginning, the words ‘Pueblo Mágico’ were visible in several public spaces, but the distinctive pinwheel logo was absent. Over time, many hotels, tour operators, and tour guides started embroidering the Magical Towns brand on their uniforms. Today, the Magical Towns brand is visible nearly everywhere in Tequila, from tour buses and murals (see Figure 7.3) to signposts and street signs (see Figure 7.4). Tequila’s town hall has both the Magical Towns brand and UNESCO’s World Heritage emblem embedded on the floor with decorative stones (see Figure 7.5). However, most stakeholders declared they ignore the brand’s usage guidelines. For stakeholder Teq5, the programme was unknown to the residents, and they have slowly started assimilating and accepting the advantages that it could offer them:

At the time, people were totally ignorant. They said, “what is this Magical Towns thing about? Is it because things disappear?”. In other words, there was even a certain mockery, but as people began to see that it gave them the opportunity for entrepreneurship and to have sources of income, people started using the brand, perhaps without knowing what the programme implied, but the person who made keyrings now wanted to put the pinwheel logo on it because they saw that it was selling.



Figure 7.3. Photographs of places where the Magical Towns brand in Tequila was visible (by author, 2019).



Figure 7.4. Information signs in Tequila use the Magical Towns' brand and UNESCO's World Heritage emblem in the frame's corners (by author, 2019).



Figure 7.5. Magical Towns brand and World Heritage emblem found embedded on the floor of Tequila's town hall (by author, 2019).

In contrast, Tlaquepaque received its Magical Town designation in 2018 and is still in its early adoption days. There, the Magical Towns brand is not as present as in Tequila. Although the brand is on signposts (see Figure 7.6), documents (see Figure 7.7 and Figure 7.8), and walls (see Figure 7.9), it needs more dissemination and visibility, so people can know the brand and learn about the programme. In recent years, the private sector has started using the brand more as it has gained more recognition, but they acknowledged that it has been through a slow process. Stakeholder Tla9, a hotel entrepreneur in Tlaquepaque, said they try to use the brand ‘to generate expectations’ in his hotel.

These are clear signs that the brand is achieving its purpose of communicating a set of positive values ingrained within the reputation and image created around the Magical Towns programme. In both towns, informal commerce and local merchants have adopted the brand, using it in their stands (see Figure 7.10), souvenirs (see Figure 7.11), and tours (see Figure 7.12). Evidently, there is a perceived synonym of quality and prestige attached to the Magical Towns brand that attracts more visitors, legitimising Tlaquepaque's tourism activity.



Figure 7.6. Photographs of signposts in Tlaquepaque using the Magical Towns brand. Information is provided in Spanish and English (by author, 2019).



Figure 7.7. Photograph of a letter at the entrance of Tlaquepaque's town hall stating that they are part of the Magical Towns programme (by author, 2019).



Figure 7.8. Photograph of a poster promoting the use of a Tour Guide app available in Tlaquepaque.



Figure 7.9. Photographs of a mural sponsored by Comex (a paint brand) in Tlaquepaque using the Magical Towns brand (by author, 2019).



Figure 7.10. Photographs of local merchants' stands using the Magical Towns brand in Tequila and Tlaquepaque (by author, 2019).



Figure 7.11. Photographs of souvenirs. a) Photograph of a souvenir with the Magical Towns brand in Tequila. b) Photograph of a mug with typography that resembles the Magical Towns brand in Tlaquepaque (by author, 2019).



Figure 7.12. Photograph of hop on and off bus offering tours to Tequila using the Magical Towns brand (by author, 2019).

However, there is a risk of brand dilution. For stakeholder Teq9, the programme and the brand have both been successful. In stakeholder Teq9's words, 'in Mexico there is no one who doesn't know what a Magical Town is', and indeed, he is right. The Mexican Institute of Intellectual Property granted the 'Famous Brand' distinction to the Magical Towns brand in 2017, as 9 out of 10 Mexicans know the brand (Puga, 2017). Stakeholder Teq9 thinks that the programme has achieved its mission of increasing the number of tourists visiting those towns, but the programme should be careful not to dilute the brand by giving it to many towns. Stakeholder Teq9 said: 'As a strategy to attract visitors, I think it has been a tremendous success (...), and it should be replicated, maybe not expand quickly because it decreases its value by integrating so many towns'.

7.3.1.2 Promotion

This subtheme looks at how both towns are being promoted. It looks at all the means of communication used as promotional tools, including events, electronic media, editorial material, and publications. It organises them into two categories: ‘Paid and Owned’ and ‘Earned and Shared’. Such distinction is based on the PESO model, which categorises media channels based on the level of control organisations have over the messages (Dietrich, 2014).

The first category looks at Paid and Owned promotional channels. The private sector notably leads the tourism promotion in both towns. In Tequila, the big distilleries like José Cuervo, Sauza, and Herradura, are the ones who make the most of the promotion through paid advertising and online presence. That is because they have all the resources for producing and distributing promotional material. Although they only promote themselves with little to no engagement with the Magical Towns programme, there were positive opinions from stakeholders who think the town benefits from such advertising. Stakeholder Teq6 said: ‘those who bet on the promotion are Cuervo, they do invest in it, but (...) if we don’t have enough money to do it ourselves, we have to take advantage of what they do’.

According to stakeholder Teq10, a business elite group pushed for Tequila’s tourist development and promotion. They consolidated Tequila as a destination integrating different projects such as the Magical Towns programme and the Tequila Trail (see section 6.2.1). Stakeholder Teq10 pointed out that the Tequila Trail served to unify the region as a destination, but it ceased being promoted. Combining both efforts helped in training all stakeholders and service providers at an early stage, consolidating a tourism industry in the region, but in stakeholder Teq10’s words, ‘when the project ended, they stopped encouraging or supporting it because they understood that they were already in a more advanced and matured phase of consolidating what was sown’.

However, stakeholder Teq1 said that the towns need more promotion. On a national level, when the Council for Tourism Promotion (CPTM) used to promote Mexico’s tourism, it always focused on the Integrally Planned Centres resorts and never promoted the Magical Towns. Stakeholder Teq1 highlighted the lack of promotion from the federal government: ‘I see billboards at the airports that say, “enjoy Cancún” or “visit Los Cabos”, but nothing about Magical Towns. I see that Cuervo, Sauza, and Herradura began touching on the roots of Mexican authenticity to promote Tequila as a destination’. Stakeholder Tla4 said that the programme started participating in international fairs like FITUR, but it has not become a priority for the current federal administration. Today, without the Council for Tourism Promotion (CPTM), there is a limited promotion from the federal government as all the resources are focused on the Maya Train tourism development.

In Tlaquepaque, the private sector also leads the tourism promotion. Stakeholder Tla2 commented that traders and businesspeople created an independent WhatsApp group to organise their own promotional activities. In 2020, the Chamber of Commerce and the local government agreed to partially fund a stand in the *Tianguis Turístico 2020* (Mexico's main travel mart). They wanted to attend as the Magical Town of Tlaquepaque, an independent destination and not part of Guadalajara's offer anymore. Unfortunately, the event was postponed and partially held virtually due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Likewise, stakeholder Tla9 commented that the same group created the website *Destino Tlaquepaque*, a portal that produces and distributes promotional material, gathering information from goods and service providers.

There are also smaller subgroups leading different projects. According to stakeholder Tla3, the *Corredor Gastronómico* project resulted from the union of several restaurateurs grouping restaurants and cafés in a directory and organising events like food markets and festivals (see Figure 7.13). Similarly, groups of independent artists have started promoting Tlaquepaque. The *Puertas Mágicas* project is altering doors in the town with street art (see section 6.2.1) and is bringing doors to other towns and bigger cities where people can glance at Tlaquepaque by virtually opening it through AR. Stakeholder Tla9 explained:

(...) We also have a promotional side, we are making doors... possibly made of wood or something, and we are going to put them in public places like town squares... for example Guadalajara's city centre, in Zapopan, or some other Magical Town. They will be on a pedestal, and when you walk by with your Instagram app and point to the door, it will show you a video of Tlaquepaque, precisely as promotional material (...), giving the feeling that you open the door and you are observing what you see in Tlaquepaque.



Figure 7.13. The Corredor Gastronómico project groups restaurants and cafés in a directory (by CG, 2020).

Therefore, local business owners and volunteers keep promotion active while they perceive that the local government does not do much. In their comments, stakeholders said that the limited promotion that the local Departments of Tourism do in both towns focuses on public spaces such as churches, gardens, and museums. That is notably true in Tequila, where the big distilleries invest in paid advertising, and the Department of Tourism focuses its actions on the administrative side of tourism. However, there seems to be a perceived incompetence. According to the stakeholders, Tequila's Department of Tourism does not even offer basic information, such as an online directory of service providers. Stakeholder Teq5 commented that 'in reality, the local Department of Tourism is only the link with the state because they don't have any commercial strategy'.

According to stakeholder Tla1, the promotion strategy of the local Department of Tourism focuses on social media and mobile apps. They manage five official accounts on social media, having two-way communication with visitors. They have two mobile apps, *Pasajero Tlaquepaque* and *Passeando por México*. The former is a directory of attractions, tourist services, and activities in Tlaquepaque, and the latter is a guide and directory for all Magical Towns. There are two more apps in the making, one for Jalisco's Magical Towns and another for promoting them in China. They also use official channels like the local government's official website to give general information.

Stakeholder Tla1 also commented that the local Department of Tourism has two main publications. One is a tourist inventory translated into English and French, listing Tlaquepaque's tourism industry's goods and service providers. The other is a digital bidding book aimed at travel agents, tour operators, and event organisers promoting the advantages of Tlaquepaque as a business destination for meetings, conferences, conventions, and corporate trips. There are similar materials in the private sector. *Destino Tlaquepaque* and Guadalajara's Visitors and Conventions Office (OFVC) have bidding books promoting Tlaquepaque.

Both towns have events organised by the local Departments of Tourism and the industry. In Tlaquepaque, they have the annual Day of the Dead Festival, and a group of restaurateurs organises the *Higo Fest* (Fig Fest), in which each restaurant brings different dishes and drinks prepared with that fruit. Similarly, Tequila hosts the National Tequila Fair, where all distilleries put up stands in an event full of live music, food, handicrafts, and cocktails. According to stakeholder Teq4, there is good coordination between the distilleries and the local Department of Tourism.

The state and federal governments organise some other events. In 2020, the first Festival of Jalisco's Magical Towns took place, bringing together Jalisco's nine Magical Towns. The festival was similar to the national Magical Towns Fair but on a smaller scale, and it was an

excellent platform for cultural showcase and learning spaces. Additionally, Tlaquepaque is home to the Annual National Ceramic Prize, which according to stakeholder Tla1, is an important event ‘(...) in which around 150 artisans from 16 Mexican states participate with 300 pieces in different categories, giving birth to the National Ceramic Prize Museum holding the winning pieces’.

The second category looks at Earned and Shared promotional channels. Television has had an important impact on Tequila’s tourism. In 2007 the telenovela *Destilando Amor* (Distilling Love), filmed in Tequila, aired on national television in prime time, telling an agave harvester’s love story (see Figure 7.14). The show naturally attracted many visitors who wanted to see the locations where it was filmed. Stakeholder Teq10 said that the telenovela had a significant impact in other countries, such as Russia, from which he receives many visitors who recall learning about Tequila through the television show. Netflix’s series *Monarca*, also set in Tequila, was thought to increase the number of visitors, but it did not have the expected effect. For stakeholder Teq5, this was because *Monarca* is exclusively available on Netflix, a paid service:

After the Magical Town designation, we didn’t feel any sort of strong impact, but when Televisa’s telenovela came out, it raised a lot of awareness in the Mexican population that Tequila is a town and not only a drink. So geographically, it helped us to be identified on the map. Netflix’s series *Monarca*, on the other hand, is only for the platform, for people that can afford it and not for everyone. Televisa is for the populace, and I think the telenovela reached all corners of Mexico and abroad. (...) At the national level, I believe that it georeferenced us as a town, that we are close to Guadalajara, that we were a typical and quiet little town at that time.

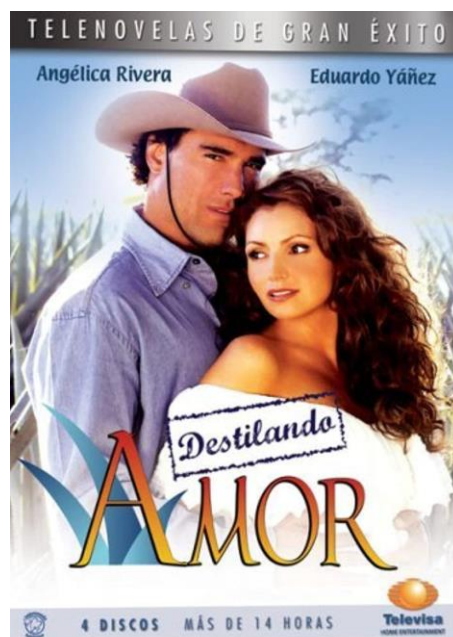


Figure 7.14. *Destilando Amor* (Distilling Love) was a popular Mexican telenovela set in Tequila (Copr. by Televisa).

Music and celebrities have also attracted visitors to Tequila. From local Mexican bands shooting their music videos in Tequila showcasing the town to big international celebrities having their own tequila brand, celebrities attract visitors to Tequila. Many international celebrities, such as George Clooney, P Diddy, Nick Jonas, Rita Ora, Kendall Jenner, and Dwayne Johnson, to name a few, have their own tequila brands with distilleries in the region (Martineau, 2019). Singer Camila Cabello visited Tequila in 2018, posting pictures on her Instagram and attracting crowds of fans trying to find her (see Figure 7.15). Through their posts on social media and celebrity media coverage, they contribute to raising awareness about Tequila and generate earned and shared free publicity.

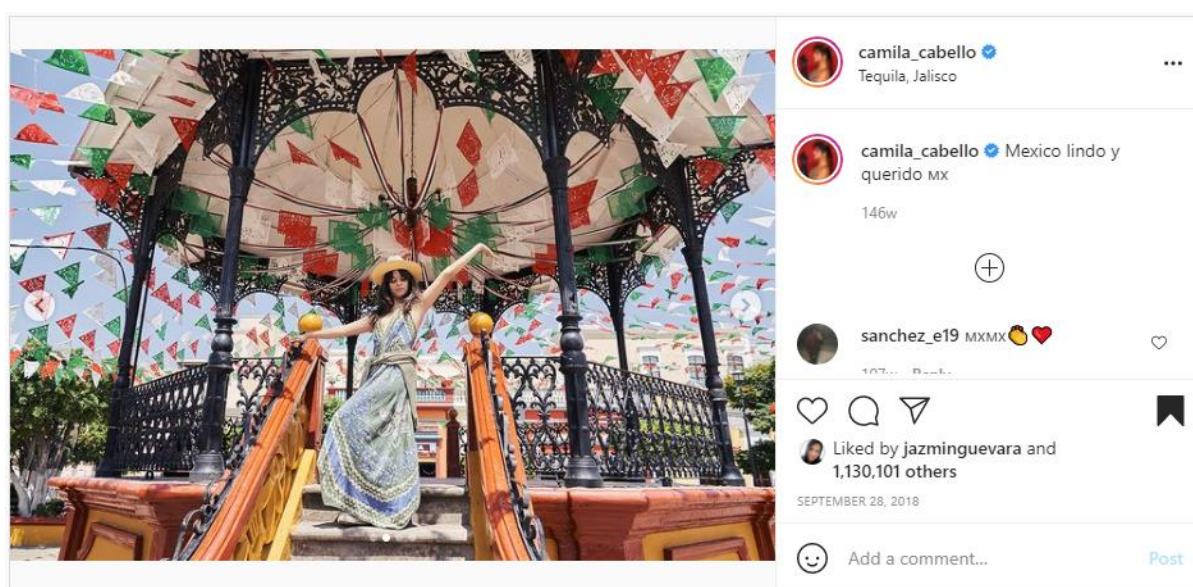


Figure 7.15. Singer Camila Cabello's Instagram post when visiting Tequila in 2018.

Stakeholders in both towns indicated using social media to promote their businesses. They use it as a way of free promotion. In the words of stakeholder Teq6, 'if you are not on the Internet, you don't exist'. In Tlaquepaque, stakeholders also acknowledge the advantages that social media offers. As previously mentioned, Tlaquepaque's Department of Tourism manages five social media accounts, uses two mobile apps and has two more apps in the making. Stakeholder Tla4 highlighted the importance of social media and its advantages in terms of budget and sustainability. Stakeholder Tla4 commented:

Social media are the best channels to communicate and inform people about the things to do and see in Tlaquepaque. Digital media are very important. We work hard with small video clips that are focused on emotion and the five senses, about flavours, colours, aromas, music and many other things that distinguish Tlaquepaque. (...) Promotion through digital media is sustainable and allows us to change and modify information without spending money or impacting the environment.

Stakeholder Tla8 said that the Internet is one of the main ways people find Tlaquepaque. It always appears as a complement or thing to do in Guadalajara. Keyword searches like 'what to do in Guadalajara' or 'what to see in Guadalajara' always bring Tlaquepaque to the top results. Likewise, many of the pictures taken in Tlaquepaque are often posted on social media with the hashtag #Guadalajara, and many travel vloggers on YouTube usually cover Tlaquepaque and Tequila as day trip activities from Guadalajara. She said she had seen positive outcomes as people recall having learnt certain things about Tlaquepaque from online content. She said she thinks that this is part of OFVC's work to improve SEO:

(...) I don't know who did it, but I do think that there is a lot of Google AdWords work, and also social media promotion from Guadalajara's Visitors and Conventions Office, from SECTUR, and again the Department of Tourism after obtaining the Magical Town designation. The people we receive repeatedly say things like, "I saw this picture of a heart and mariachi on visit Guadalajara's Instagram, and they told me it was in Tlaquepaque" or "I saw the *jericallas* on a YouTube video, and the vlogger said it was in Tlaquepaque". I believe there is strong work behind that, and I am sure these organisations are investing in that along with the organic web traffic.

For stakeholder Tla7, most of his guests find them through the recommendation of previous guests. Since their hotel is one of the few that exclusively caters to English speakers, previous guests recommend it to their family and friends. Their main promotion is through their previous guests' word of mouth when they post pictures on social media and leave reviews on websites like TripAdvisor. That helps promote his hotel as a business and the town as a destination.

Other voices pointed out that both towns should not have more promotion. In Tequila, the number of visitors has exceeded the capabilities of the infrastructure (see section 6.2.6) and in Tlaquepaque. Stakeholder Tla9 said they need to do some housekeeping and sort out their internal problems to invite visitors to a cleaner, friendlier, and problem-free space. For stakeholder Tla9, PR is more important than marketing. In his opinion, investing humongous amounts of money in promotion and advertising could be counterproductive, and instead, he proposes improving the town and evidencing such improvements on social media:

Spending a million pesos on marketing when our town is in bad shape? I think it's the opposite. What ends up happening is that we would attract many people who will speak ill of us because maybe our marketing team was so good that it convinced people to come, but when they come, the only things they find are negative. So, from my point of view, the promotional actions in Tlaquepaque should be based on social maintenance. What does this mean? Doing street cleaning campaigns, façade painting, cultural projects, and documenting that on social media and I think it is indirect advertising of much greater impact than doing paid advertising.

Social media offers great platforms for promotion. With the dissolution of the Council for Tourism Promotion (CPTM) which was replaced by the Council for Tourism Diplomacy, the Magical Towns programme faces a bigger challenge. As covered in Chapter 4, platforms like the Secretariat of Tourism and VisitMexico websites, along with their social media accounts and the *Mexico Desconocido* Magical Towns guide, offer great platforms for planning a trip based on official information (see section 4.6.4). However, towns should not rely on federal forms of paid and owned media and instead work closely with influencers to create a more organic wave of visitors based on earned and shared media. Hashtags on Instagram, and YouTube vloggers, offer great opportunities to improve promotion as individual towns (see section 4.6.5).

7.3.1.3 Use of 360-degree formats

Both towns have antecedents of using 360-degree formats as promotional tools. Some companies have approached business owners offering this service to promote their hotels or restaurants, uploading it to their websites or platforms like TripAdvisor and Google Maps. Primarily, these are 360-degree photographs, which are useful for hotels so potential guests can see and explore a sample room before booking. In Tlaquepaque, stakeholder Tla5 commented that in their case, TripAdvisor contacted them directly to do so:

(...) It is one of the benefits TripAdvisor gave to people with them. They came once to take... I thought they were like photos, but it was completely 360. They chose us, and it was about 2 or 3 years ago. I think they chose us because they saw that the hotel was very colourful and we had a good online presence.

Another example is Google Maps, which has already entirely covered both towns on Street View. This modality allows users to explore the streets of the towns in 360 degrees by compiling a series of 360-degree photographs. This format is also available for visualising it on VR HMDs, giving a more immersive experience, but it lacks the liveliness that 360-degree video (like the one presented in this study) offers as they remain still snapshots. Stakeholder Teq5 commented that the federal government, in alliance with Google, presented a project photographing Tequila's main attractions in 360 degrees. However, despite multiple attempts to find more information about said project to include it in this study, nothing was found. Stakeholder Teq5:

There was a 360-videos project by Google Maps, precisely from the Federal Secretariat of Tourism in an agreement with Google in 2013. It was a tool that helped people to get

an idea of what they'd find in Tequila, to see inside the museums, see the old houses... because it was a project purely focused on tourist attractions, the 20 most emblematic tourist attractions of Tequila in 360 degrees or something like that but I don't know what happened after that.

However, when it comes to 360-degree video, the technology adoption has been more limited. There are not many examples of using 360-degree video in either town, but there is one worth mentioning. Tequila Patrón launched a 360-degree video tour in 2020, and many other companies offered similar experiences during the Covid-19 pandemic lockdown that same year. Although the video was shot in Jalisco's highlands and did not feature the town of Tequila, it shows a virtual tour of their hacienda, explaining every step of their tequila-making process. They showcase the agave fields, architecture, and atmosphere part of the mestizo identity commonly associated with *mexicanidad* and *lo mexicano* found in Tequila and Tlaquepaque. It was part of their marketing campaign and is compatible with any VR HMD using YouTube, just like the one used in this study.

7.3.2 Communication problems

7.3.2.1 Lack of awareness

There is a general lack of awareness about the existence of Tequila as a town. Many international tourists and potential visitors do not know that Tequila is a place, not just a drink (see section 8.2.4). This situation happens not only among international tourists but even among Mexicans. Stakeholder Teq2 shared an anecdote from the first time they participated in a tourist fair promoting Tequila as a town in other cities. Stakeholder Teq2 said that every time they explained to people that they represented Tequila, people would reply, 'sorry, which brand did you say you sell?'. This situation has slowly changed over the years. References to Tequila in popular culture, like the *Destilando Amor* telenovela and Netflix series *Monarca* have helped position Tequila as a town. However, according to stakeholder Teq3, people still ignore that the drink took its name from the town and the town took its name from the volcano.

Interviewed stakeholders also reported a general lack of awareness about the Magical Towns programme and brand among foreign visitors. Tour guides recalled having international tourists interested in the programme once they explained it to them. Particularly those US-American, Canadian and European retirees living in Mexico who have more time to explore and enjoy slow tourism in small towns. However, stakeholder Tla8 declared not even mentioning the programme or using the Magical Towns brand to target international tourists as the stakeholder

thinks it is not of international tourists' interest. Stakeholder Tla8 said that international tourists 'don't even care'.

These types of comments naturally influenced the development of this study's online questionnaire. The repeated lack of awareness about Tequila, Tlaquepaque, and the Magical Towns programme highlighted an area to explore. In order to assess the effectiveness of 360-degree video in promoting the Magical Towns, it was necessary to assess potential visitors' levels of awareness. Therefore, the online questions included a series of multiple selection and Likert scale questions developed for that purpose (see section 5.7 and results in Chapter 8).

7.3.2.2 Lack of communication

There is generally poor communication at all levels. There is minimal communication between the local government, the tourism industry, the residents, and the visitors in all directions. Many residents ignore what the programme is about or how they can get benefitted. This situation has created many problems and misunderstandings. For instance, Tequila deals with constant complaints about noise and parking space (see section 7.2.2.2). In Tlaquepaque, there has not been any official communication from the local Department of Tourism or the local committee explaining the implications of their reasonably new designation to all the neighbours. Since Tlaquepaque has been a tourist hotspot for many years, the residents have not noticed a change and are not bothered about the Magical Town designation.

Stakeholder Tla8 explained that they had struggled to explain the Magical Towns' selection criteria in their tours. Stakeholder Tla8 said that when visitors go to a different Magical Town, they expect to see something similar to Tlaquepaque, but they get disappointed when other towns, like the nearby town of Ajijic, do not fulfil their expectations. This lack of communication and understanding about the programme can be seen in other areas of the tourist sector. For instance, stakeholder Tla3 said they do not feel fully integrated and do not use the Magical Towns brand because they ignore all the implications of the programme and do not want to appropriate or misuse it. For stakeholder Tla8, the task should focus on informing people about the Magical Towns programme. In their opinion, tourism authorities imply that everybody already knows the programme, but they should keep doing campaigns to inform residents and visitors and familiarise them with the programme:

There is a disinformation issue. They take for granted that people know what a Magical Town is and the criteria elements to become a Magical Town. So, there is much ignorance, and there has been no prior information work before promoting the destination as a Magical Town. I think that is the biggest mistake.

However, stakeholder Tla2 highlighted the lack of interest that the local authorities have in establishing better communication with business owners and residents. They shared an anecdote when the local government started working on refurbishing one of the main streets, transforming it into a semi-pedestrian street. All the neighbours and merchants who have their businesses on that street got angry as they were not consulted about it, and the works surprised them on a random day. They tried to speak with the mayor, but she did not receive them. That situation caused a lot of disagreement and a climate of anger.

In Tequila, some projects attempt to get closer to residents that are not involved in tourism, such as the civil associations CODIT and Voces de Tequila. On the one hand, CODIT was formed as a civil association that looks after the town's tourist development. Notably, they are developing the *Tequila Inteligente* project, which will integrate technology such as free Wi-Fi and apps so visitors can communicate with service providers and sensors that collect Big Data to implement targeted strategies. Their idea is to make Tequila a Smart Destination. On the other hand, The *Voces de Tequila* project tries to make information more accessible, integrating the local community into the programme by showing how ordinary people benefit through tourism. Moreover, stakeholder Teq2 explained that they take a number of pupils on a free bus tour around Tequila every year, explaining what they do as tour service providers and what the town has to offer. By informing new generations, they attempt to ensure continuity in understanding and developing the Magical Towns programme in their community. Tlaquepaque could be benefitted from these types of actions.

Stakeholders in Tlaquepaque maintain informal communication through WhatsApp groups. Businesspeople use it to share thoughts, organise events, set up street decorations, and execute projects like the *Destino Tlaquepaque* website (see section 7.3.1.2). Members of the official committees naturally formed these de facto groups due to the lack of action, leadership, and communication within the official committees and the local government. There is also a WhatsApp group with the Chief Constable of the local police. Businesspeople can directly seek help for emergencies related to disorder or criminal activity.

The lack of communication has created misunderstandings when promoting the town at events and fairs. Stakeholder Tla5 explained that despite having an independent WhatsApp group with other business owners and traders, they often have differences and disagreements. The lack of leadership and effective planning makes everything more complex, and they have had to improvise and use their own economic resources to participate in events and travel marts. There is an urgent need for better coordination and communication with the local government to better participate in events to make themselves known.

However, communication should not only be one way. Residents should be considered when developing tourist attractions and infrastructure changes, and residents should be listened to, particularly when developing local culture and traditions representations. Stakeholder Teq9, explained that there should be more communication with the residents to fully represent and reflect their culture, avoid misinterpretations, and not impose the stereotypical elements to fulfil the tourist gaze (see section 6.2.3).

7.4 Conclusion

It appears that the programme has had a positive impact. The resident's perception of wellbeing in Tequila has improved with perceived lower levels of unemployment and emigration. Young residents are not migrating to bigger cities or the US anymore as they are finding new opportunities in their town, and those who once left are returning as their English is a highly valuable skill. Although there is a perceived benefit inequality, a phrase repeatedly emerged during the interviews: 'if it rains, we all get wet'. Even when the big distilleries take most of the profit generated by tourism, local businesses still get benefitted. Tourists attracted by José Cuervo tequila's campaigns take the factory tour and spend some time in the town consuming local products and services, contributing to the town's economy. Tlaquepaque has just recently received its designation, and therefore the programme advantages have yet to be seen.

Despite not having access to infrastructure resources anymore, there is a perceived benefit in obtaining the brand usage rights. The Magical Towns designation, in a way, legitimises the town's heritage and tourism industry, and stakeholders acknowledge that the sole right to use the brand is good enough, despite the budget cuts. This is a good sign that the brand is achieving its purpose of communicating positive values and associating them with the towns in the programme. Surprisingly, it seems like business owners have begun to participate and engage even more than when they had access to government resources as they have learnt to do more with less, taking advantage of the programme's brand.

Some of the negative aspects are related to having the wrong people in power positions and elitist practices in the local committees. There is a generalised mistrust towards the local governments (which appears to come from a lack of transparency), non-compliance with regulations, and increased traffic, garbage, noise, lack of parking spaces, and safety concerns. These negative aspects also affect Mexico's image and reputation, often seen as unorganised and corrupted. Local governments and the private sector need to work together. They should develop a good partnership meeting each other's needs. Local governments have access to resources that can improve the towns' infrastructure with good planning for orderly growth while the

private sector can materialise tourist-related projects and investments more easily. The Magical Towns Programme should also have stricter regulations, guidelines, and inspections to ensure the same quality of experience among towns.

However, there cannot be a good partnership between the two if there is no trust, good communication and understanding. Local governments should have a more open communication and host regular meetings with the Magical Towns committee and stakeholders so they can share plans, and actions. They should also strengthen communication with the residents so they understand the programme's benefits and the impact on their lives, transferring their hostility, prejudice, apathy, and ignorance to sympathy, acceptance, interest, and knowledge. The stakeholders need to feel represented in the committees and that their voices and concerns are truly heard. There cannot be transparency and collaboration if an economic or political elite controls tourism in the towns.

Chapter 8. Photography and 360-degree video: shaping perceptions of Mexico

8.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the first part of a thematic analysis of the second data set focusing on potential visitors' perspectives. The second data set combined the data obtained from the online questionnaire and the virtual focus groups. Participants were assigned a number when they received their participant's kit. Some questionnaire respondents were filtered and invited to participate in the virtual focus groups (see Chapter 5). This analysis chapter is divided into two identified themes: Impression and Promotion, with their respective subthemes. The analysis follows an explanatory sequential research design focusing on the qualitative data, using the virtual focus groups data to explain and draw practical conclusions regarding the online questionnaire results. This helps give insights into the participants' thoughts about their impression of Mexico and the use of photographic and 360-degree video material in promoting Mexico's Magical Towns.

8.2 Impression

The first theme covers the impression that participants have of Mexico. As a starting point, questionnaire respondents rated Mexico, Tequila, and Tlaquepaque on a seven-point semantic differential scale. At the start of the questionnaire, they made judgements by sliding a bar on a scale of bipolar adjectives. Participants rated the extent they think of Mexico in either direction. After looking at Tequila's photographs and Tlaquepaque's 360-degree video, they completed a similar task, presenting the same series of adjectives. This was intended to understand their preconceptions, attitudes, and image of Mexico before presenting the promotional material and to evaluate their impression of Tequila and Tlaquepaque.

Figure 8.1 shows the semantic differential results overlapped. Although it seems like there is not much difference in responses, the perception of Inexpensive/Expensive, and, more importantly, Dangerous/Safe differed significantly. While participants regarded Mexico as somehow Inexpensive and Dangerous, that was reverted after looking at the photographs and 360-degree video. Notably, respondents also inclined more towards Dangerous when thinking of Mexico, but the 360-degree video made them perceive Tlaquepaque as a Safe place.

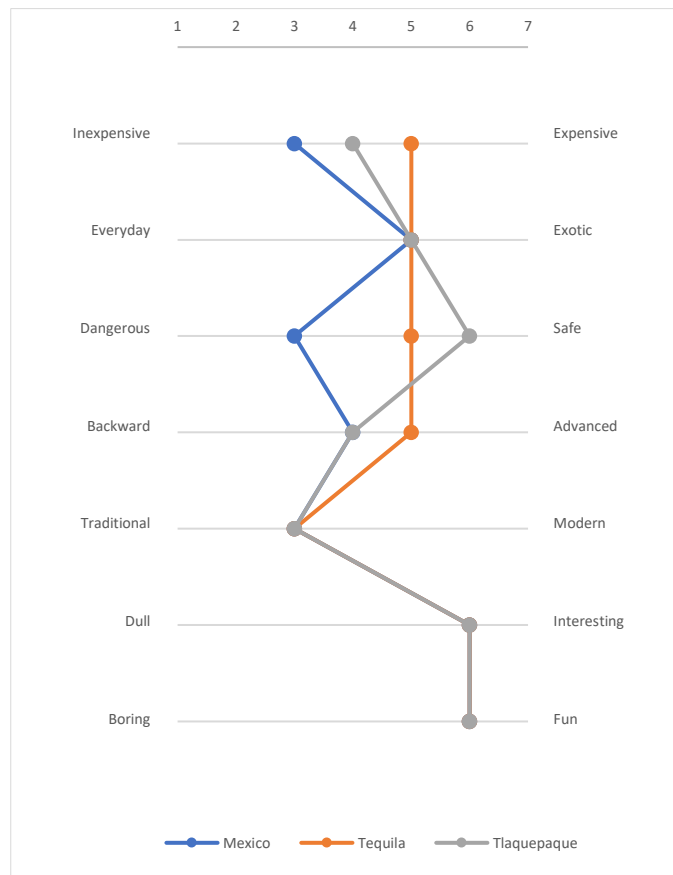


Figure 8.1. Semantic differential of participants' impression.

This theme attempts to explain those results further. It looks at participants' responses to open-ended questions in the questionnaire and their opinions gathered from the focus groups in more depth. This theme is, in turn, subdivided into five subthemes, namely Branding, Impression of Mexico, Sources for impression, Impression of Tequila, and Impression of Tlaquepaque, with their respective subthemes. See Figure 8.2 for reference.

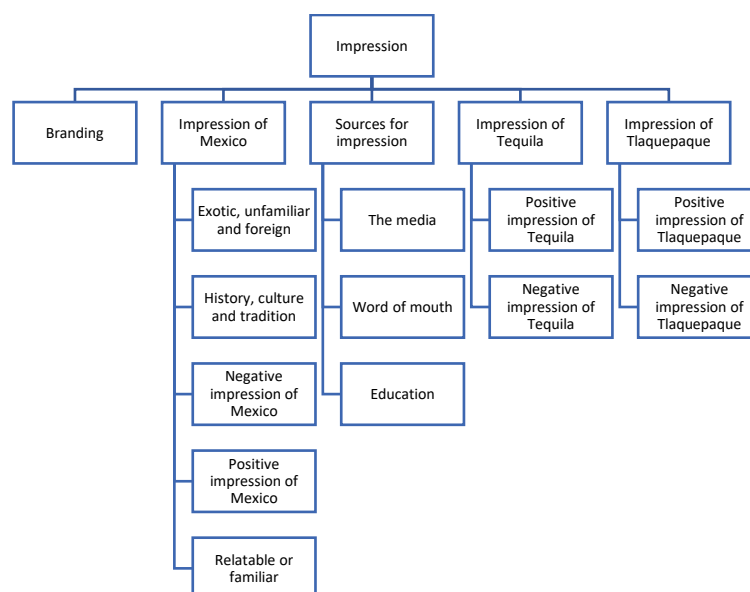


Figure 8.2. Thematic map of the theme Impression

8.2.1 Branding

There is a generalised lack of awareness among potential visitors regarding Mexico's and the Magical Towns' brands. On the one hand, as per Figure 8.3, 60.38% of the participants did not recall seeing Mexico's country brand, 24.53% reported having seen it, and 15.09% were unsure. On the other hand, an overwhelming majority of 88.68% of participants reported that they had not seen the Magical Towns brand before the questionnaire. Only a small 9.43% declared having seen it, and a smaller 1.89% was unsure. What is clear, though, is that more participants recognised Mexico's country brand than the Magical Towns'.

The places where they have seen the brands, however, are different. Participants who reported seeing Mexico's country brand remembered doing so in promotional material such as advertisements, websites, magazines, brochures, airports, and travel fairs. In contrast, only one person reported seeing the Magical Towns brand in promotional material, while the rest remembered seeing it when visiting Mexico. Either way, most participants did not remember exactly where they saw the brands.

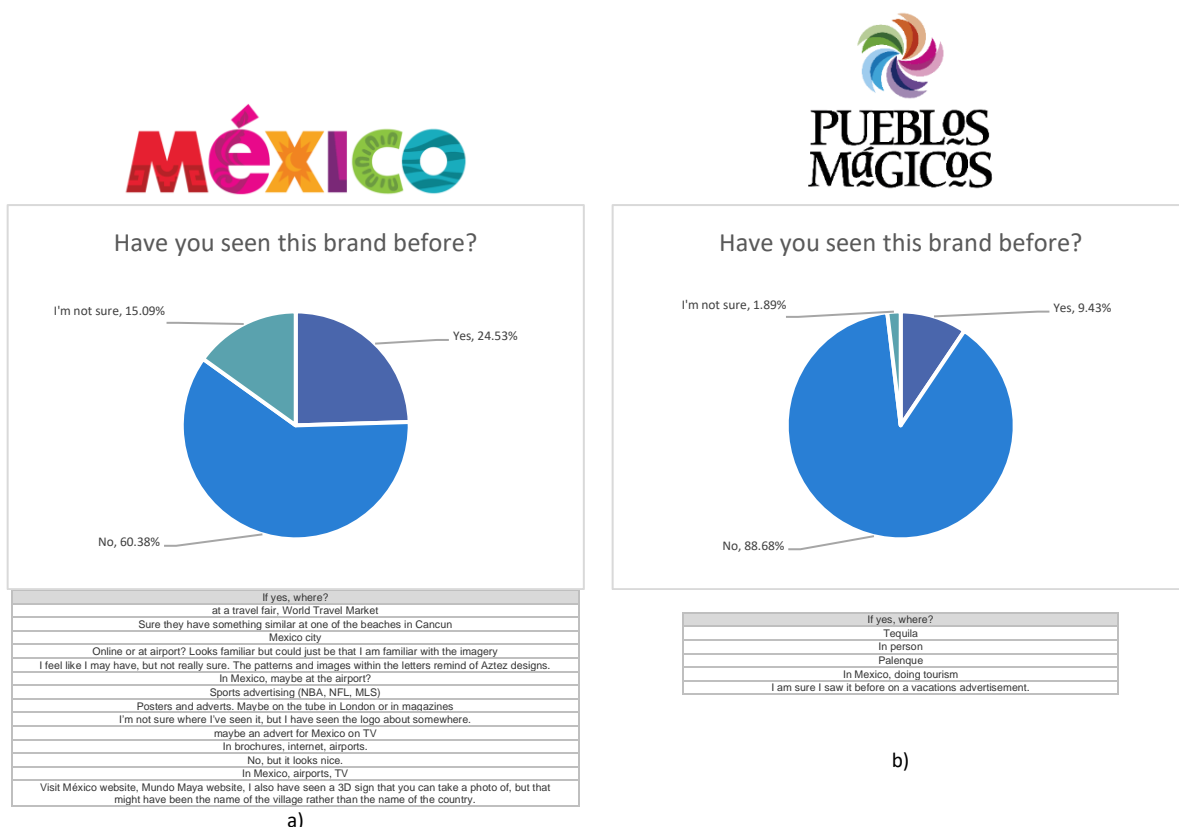


Figure 8.3. Brand awareness level. a) Level of awareness of Mexico's country brand. b) Level of awareness of the Magical Towns' brand.

This is something known as the sleeper effect. The message receiver (in this case, the survey respondents) tends to forget its source more rapidly than the actual content of the message

because, in the end, what really caught their attention was the brand itself. Mexico's country brand resonates more with participants as it is better positioned than the Magical Towns brand. It is more easily remembered as it is a single word (the name of the country), it is colourful, and it has more exposure being used in a broader range of places, such as tourism events, destinations, international sports events, advertisements, websites, and business meetings among others. On the contrary, the Magical Towns brand consists of two Spanish words that non-Spanish speakers could easily forget, and although it has a distinctive colourful pinwheel, the brand is mainly used locally.

8.2.2 Impression of Mexico

Questionnaire respondents rated the quality of Mexico's attributes based on Buhmann (2016) aesthetic dimension of country image. With a Likert scale from Very poor to Excellent, they rated Mexico in four categories: Cultural goods, Culinary, History and traditions, and Landscape and scenery. Although there was an average positive response, with most attributes rated as Excellent, the Cultural goods category was rated only as 'good' (see Figure 8.4). A possible explanation for this could be the lack of knowledge about Mexico's cultural attributes, an issue addressed in 8.2.2.2.

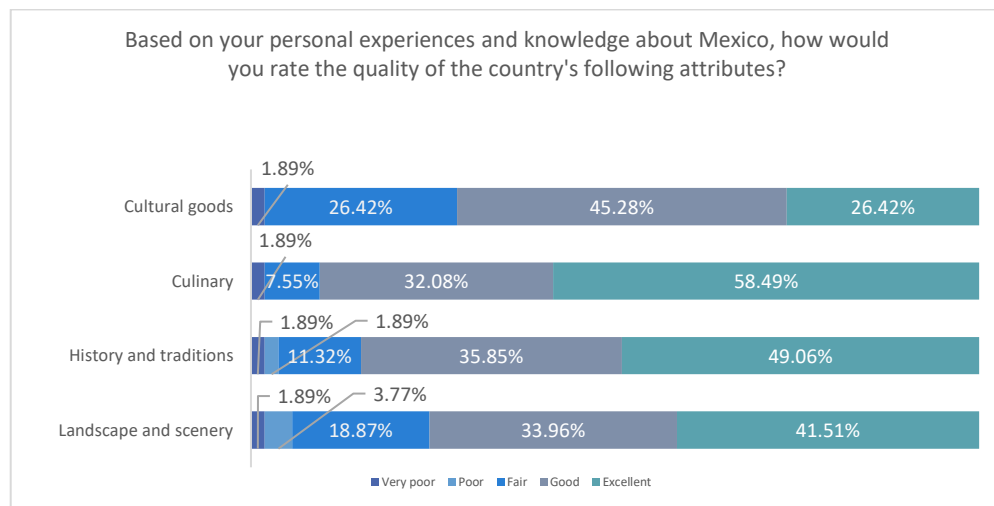


Figure 8.4. Perceived quality of Mexico's aesthetic dimension attributes

Similarly, they selected pictures of elements they commonly associate with Mexico in the same categories. In a series of picture association questions, the questionnaire presented nine pictures in each aesthetic dimension category, but this time splitting Landscape and scenery into Natural and Urban. Figure 8.5 shows the top three selected pictures for each category, highlighting the most selected ones in each category. The top responses correspond to the visual

country image they have of Mexico, which falls in the common representations of Mexico in the media (as addressed in sections 4.3 and 4.4).



Figure 8.5. Summary of Country Image aesthetic dimension.

When asked about the reasons for having such impression of Mexico, responses varied. A glance at the answers to the question ‘Reflecting on your previous answers, why do you think you have that impression of the country?’ revealed that most of their impression comes from US-American films and television, as well as lived experiences when visiting the country and staying on holiday resorts. Figure 8.6 shows a word cloud of the most repeated words in the answers to that question. Although it all seems to correspond with some of the expectations, the following subthemes look at specific comments regarding their perception of Mexico in more depth, trying to explain the previously mentioned results.



Figure 8.6. Word cloud of reasons for having such impression.

8.2.2.1 Exotic, unfamiliar and foreign

It appears that participants perceive Mexico as an exotic place, different to everything they know. In both the questionnaire and the focus group, some participants reported associating Mexico with coastal areas and holiday resorts like Cancún, describing it as a colourful place with very hot weather. Some others described it as a diverse and complex country, ‘a vibrant, very culturally diverse place’, rich in indigenous cultures with elements of exoticism. Likewise, they think of it as a place with a lot of everything, such as city breaks, beaches, cultural places to visit, fun, and nightlife. There was no clear homogenous answer, and they all thought about Mexico differently.

Indeed, respondents found it difficult to describe and rate Mexico. They were hesitant to describe their impression because most of them had not travelled there and did not want to make any judgements. However, they said that when they think of Mexico, they think of it as a unique entity and not precisely tied to its Hispanic roots. When they think of *sombreros*, *charros*, *mariachi*, and *Tequila*, they think of them as being Mexican elements, even though they are, to a certain extent, of Spanish origin historically. Such separation of perceiving cultural attributes as Mexican and not as European makes them think of Mexico as a non-western country when it is indeed part of the western world. Hence, they hesitate to see and judge Mexico with the same standards they would use for other countries. For instance, participant 56 said that this situation prevented them from classifying Mexico in specific ways:

I guess I would find it problematic to frame any places backward because, like there’s just different citizens, but I guess that those words would give connotation to like that there is a norm in society and how often we think there are some ways advanced or no, those ideas, then we think of they like Westernised and I find that gets problematic framing someone that wasn’t Westerners backwards, and so I guess I just struggled a bit at times.

That shows not only the lack of knowledge about Mexico but also a generalised ignorance about its culture, traditions, development, and landscapes. There were repeated comments of surprise on the online questionnaire, such as ‘I didn’t know *Tequila* was a place’, showing a lack of awareness regarding the existence of both destinations examined in this study. Similarly, comments like ‘*Tequila* looks bright and colourful, with very interesting architecture, which I’d love to see more of’, ‘I hadn’t really thought of Mexico in this way before’, ‘*Tequila* looked very affluent and beautiful place, the natural world looks very tropical and alive with nature’, ‘I haven’t seen areas of Mexico presented like this in films and TV very often’, and ‘It looked

much more interesting and tourist-friendly than I was expecting', revealed that the impression of Mexico that some participants had was utterly different to reality.

The fact that all participants think about Mexico differently and that, for many, what they saw during the study was not what they were expecting brings two main opportunities. On the one hand, Mexico's tourism industry has a wide range of destinations and activities for all types of travellers seeking different Mexicos. On the other hand, promoting such destinations, including those part of the Magical Towns programme, such as Tequila and Tlaquepaque, could communicate other faces of Mexico. This is an excellent opportunity for Mexico to show itself through its tourism industry.

8.2.2.2 History, culture and tradition

Participants acknowledged being uneducated about Mexico and the Americas in general. They opened themselves up and confessed to being ignorant of the country's geography, history, and traditions. Particularly about Mexico's pre-Columbian history and indigenous cultures. They said they frequently confuse it with other countries in the Americas, which became notorious as Mexico was constantly wrongly referred to as being part of Central and South America. Although many participants said they associate Mexico with 'ancient history', most participants declared that they associate the notion of 'pre-Columbian civilisations' more with South American countries, particularly with the Inca Empire and archaeological sites like Machu Picchu in Peru.

Even when confessing being ignorant about Mexico, they identified some Mexican historical items and traditions. The picture association question showed that a vast majority of respondents (94.34%) identified Mariachi bands as Mexican (see Figure 8.7). Similarly, they associate the Kukulcan Temple/Castle in the Maya city of Chichen Itza (75.58%), the Aztec Sun Stone (64.15%), and the Concheros dance (60.38%) with Mexico. More than half of them (54.72%) identified the Charro/Charrería, Mexico's national sport, and there were repeated mentions of the Day of the Dead celebrations in both the questionnaire (52.83%) and focus groups. Perhaps, because they have more exposure in the media, such as in documentaries and films like Disney's *Coco*, they are always assumed to be Mexican, unlike less popular traditions such as Michoacán's old men dance (35.85%) and Papantla's flying men (15.09%), or the highly unknown history of Emperor Maximilian I of Mexico (9.43%).

Whatever the case, they said that when they think of Mexico's history and indigenous cultures, they think of it as separate from modern-day Mexico. For participant 50, their ignorance lies in knowing more about Mexico's past than its present. They said that 'there's a tendency to portray Mexico as uber traditional, really engrossed in its cultural and culinary history',

diminishing the opportunities to learn more about the real Mexico. They continued: 'I know a reasonable amount about these traditions but not much about the realities of Mexico as it exists today, outside of historical narratives'.

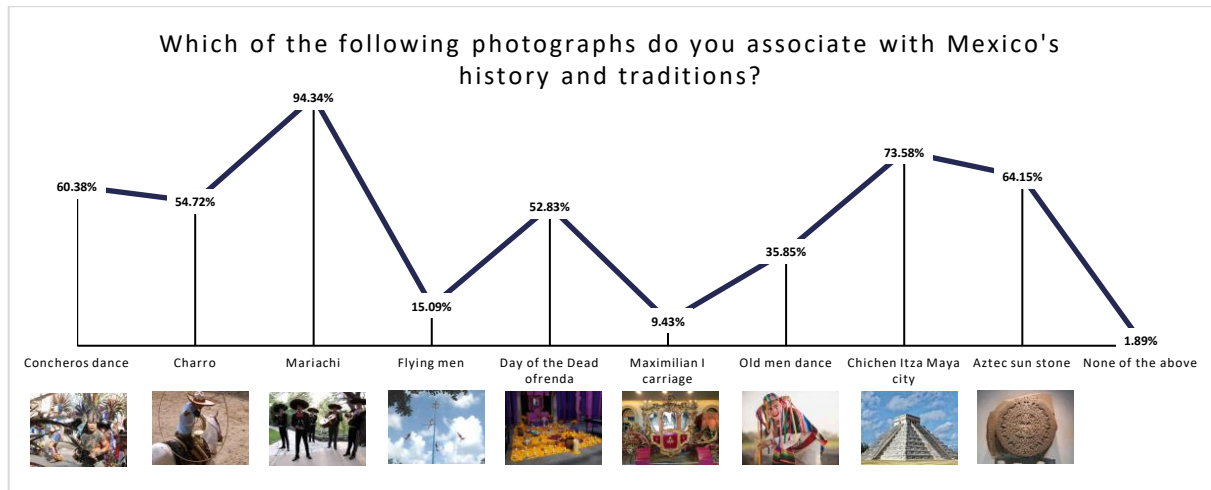


Figure 8.7. Picture association of Mexico's history and traditions.

Similarly, there were repeated references to Mexican gastronomy. Although participants were able to recognise tacos (92.45%), guacamole (83.02%), jalapeño peppers (73.58%), and tequila (71.70%) as Mexican, unpopular edibles such as tamales (37.74%), mole (32.08%), and pan dulce (24.53%) came last (see Figure 8.8). Participants recognised that their knowledge of Mexican cuisine is sometimes limited to what is served as 'Mexican food' in their country, which, in many cases, tends to be Tex-Mex food. Comments such as 'I like so-called Mexican food in this country, but appreciate these are versions of the cuisine, and the food in Mexico itself will be different' were common. Their knowledge of Mexican food has also been acquired through the media. Participant 44 recalled having watched several shows about it:

A lot of my impressions are formed via a culinary perspective. TV programmes and magazines about Mexican food. Though these are often detached from the country itself. And it is only through evocative and exotic language that the country is called to mind. There have been a few more programmes where the hosts may travel to the country, meet people, visit destinations, and try local cuisine. One that Rick Stein did come to mind. As well as another on Netflix about street food, in which the show visited different countries around the world and explored famous dishes through a series of vignettes.

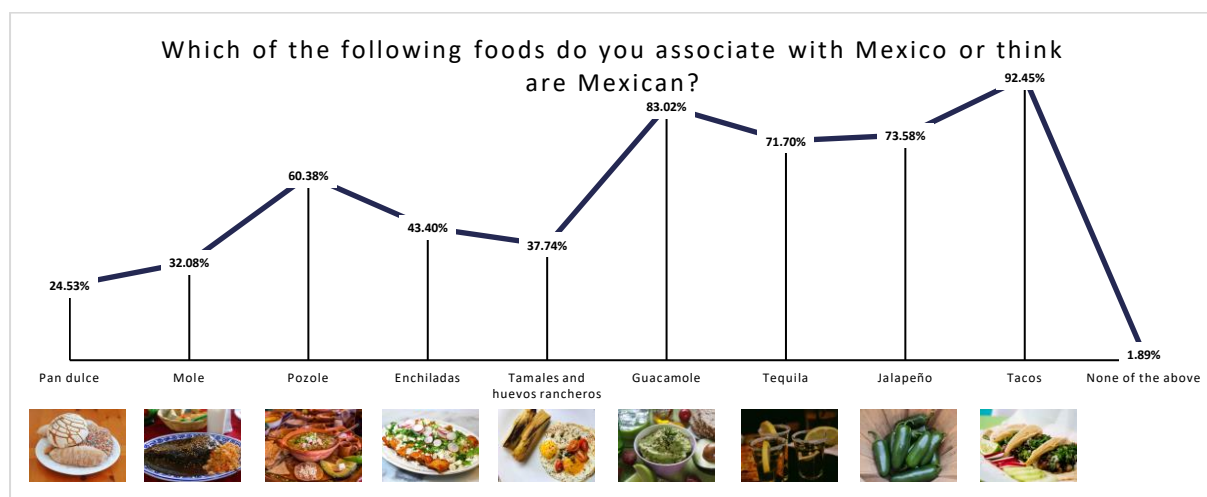


Figure 8.8. Picture association of Mexico's culinary attributes.

When it comes to Cultural goods, participants seemed more hesitant. A majority of only 77.36% recognised the charro hat, known as sombrero in the anglosphere, followed by the Mazahua rag dolls (64.15%), and nearly half of them (49.06%) identified the Wixárika (Huichol) beadwork (see Figure 8.9). Oaxaca's black pottery came last (18.87%) as it may not resemble Mexican imagery, and the Mexican Talavera came second last (24.53%) as it shares origin and relation with Spain.

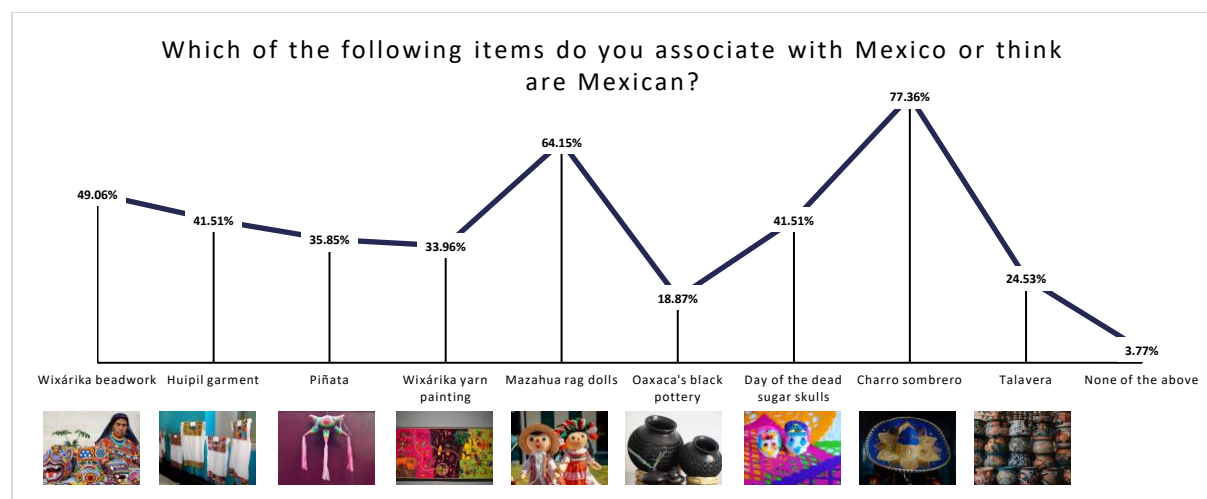


Figure 8.9. Picture association of Mexico's cultural goods.

Thus, tackling ignorance and improving communication with the publics is important. A good campaign promoting Mexico as a destination should use a solid PR strategy to transfer ignorance to knowledge (see Jefkins, 1994). A promotional campaign's success would depend on how educated the publics are. Educated publics are more likely to respond positively to eventual campaigns (Baines *et al.*, 2004, p. 13) that could promote different aspects of Mexico. In other words, a campaign promoting Mexico's Magical Towns might not be as effective if

the publics are not informed about Mexico's cultural diversity, history, traditions, and cuisine. That is an extremely complex but achievable task in the long term. Interest could be triggered through different tools such as events, exhibitions, podcasts, or other forms of communication that could trigger interest in particular publics and broader coverage in local media outlets.

8.2.2.3 Negative impression of Mexico

Despite the expectations, there was little to no negative impression reported in the first instance. Participants were hesitant to talk negatively about Mexico. However, they acknowledged that it is a developing country and it, therefore, has its good and bad things. Some of the country's issues they were aware of include drug problems, migration, violence, and underdevelopment. These perceived issues also come from Mexico's relation to the US and the US-American media. Political discourses and news coverage on border issues, such as drug trafficking and asylum seekers' caravans walking from Central America to the US, to name a few, reinforce a negative narrative about Mexico. Participant 44 said:

(...) I know Mexico is framed and stigmatised as a threatening "other" for political reasons, but I think the fact that there are always stories of people wanting to / trying to migrate from Mexico to USA (whether that be by legal or illegal means) suggests that some feel there are more opportunities in USA compared to Mexico. (...) I think their repeated portrayal (in both news, TV and film) reinforces that perception of Mexico as a country that is not prosperous or highly developed, and as potentially being unsafe.

Participants said that US-American television shows often portray drug cartel conflicts and Mexican stereotypes like barren landscapes and illegal immigration. Two examples of these types of content with a repeated mention were *Breaking Bad* and *Narcos*. Both television shows are about drugs and address border issues, with parts of their storylines set in Mexico. For participant 61, these types of shows 'are set in Mexico to further reinforce their own narrative'. They continued: 'if their storyline features references to drugs or gangs in a barren landscape, I commonly see the story play out in Mexico, even though somewhere else in southern US would have sufficed'.

Perhaps the cultural differences between Mexico and the US make Mexico the perfect target for fictional narratives. It is evident that in the North American Neighbourhood, the US and Canada share more things in common than they do with Mexico. Therefore, it is easy to assume that Mexico represents the *other* country, the *other* language, and the *other* people. That assumed *other* is then exported to the rest of the world through the US-American media (see Chapter 4). Participant 47 added:

(...) part of the sort of cultural stereotype of Mexico being that place of crime comes from... because America dominates the world's media so much... in movies and TV, you know it's coming from America and it's convenient in TV dramas to have villains and danger and that's often because Mexico's right next to America and it's a convenient place to hang those kinds of stereotypes on for the purposes of you know... of entertainment, but I think it's you know decades of that have sort of ingrained it in cultural consciousness, a bit in and it might have been true 50 years ago, more than today.

That concept of otherness and ingrained negative stereotypes resonates in the travel intentions of Europeans. For instance, participant 49 shared that their sister wanted a backpacking trip to Hispanic America. They said that if their sister were backpacking around Europe, they would feel less anxious about it. The idea of her not being around other English speakers and being in a part of the world they do not consider 'western' terrifies them as, in their words, 'unfortunately is like how we sort of deemed to be safe for people to be around. (...) I think those kinds of inherent stereotypes and suspicions like I still going to run through.'

8.2.2.4 Positive impression of Mexico

There were seven references regarding Mexico in a highly positive way. Participants described Mexicans as 'friendly and welcoming', 'friendly and genuine people' and Mexico as a 'colourful country full of music, traditions, and fun'. Although most participants agreed that the negative representation comes from television series and films, a participant said that much of the positive comes from sports. They mentioned Mexico's World Cup being positively recounted on sports documentaries and that BBC and ITV usually do a small piece about the country during football tournaments, portraying it as 'vibrant, passionate, and friendly'. With positive representations that develop positive impressions, the impression of Mexico being dangerous decreases.

Four participants in the focus groups stated that they never thought Mexico was particularly dangerous or a place to avoid visiting. They acknowledged that 'it's probably not as dangerous as media might portray it' and that 'not everywhere in Mexico is dangerous'. Participant 7 said: 'I guess it just depends where you go and what time of the day you're going to those places'. Thus, they agreed they would take the same precautions in any other place if they visited Mexico. Participant 18 said:

I pretty much answered the same even after... I've never really thought of Mexico specifically dangerous or... not any more than any other country, to be honest (...) I've never thought of Mexico being that dangerous, but then again, every time before we go to a country I've never been to I'm always worried, it's a new place, I've never been to

there, it doesn't matter whether it's England or Mexico or wherever (...) there are always risks, so I was kinda in the middle.

Therefore, having a positive impression is key to constructing Mexico's country image. However, that would really depend on the type of earned media it gets. Most international news coverage on Mexico is usually related to drug violence. Not because they are the only news from Mexico but because they are a real problem representing potential risks for international visitors, and they are shocking enough to be newsworthy or to be included as part of the agenda. Although most television series and films portray negative representations, sports are an excellent opportunity to keep spreading positive ones. International sports events where the country could have more control over the information and representation, such as the upcoming World Cup 2026 to be held in North America and hosted by Canada, the US, and Mexico, would be key.

8.2.2.5 Relatable or familiar

The answers to the picture association questions reflected the effects of the reinforced imagery of barren landscapes and deserts used to represent Mexico in the US-American media. Pictures of the Sonora desert (81.13%), the Chihuahua desert (77.36%), and the agave fields (73.58%) were the three most selected pictures in the Natural landscape and scenery category (see Figure 8.10). They were only followed by a picture of Cancún (64.15%), a well-known holiday resort. Unsurprisingly, the Sumidero canyon (18.87%) and the snowed Popocatepetl volcano (11.32%) were the least associated pictures. Perhaps, because they show landscapes that are not often used for representing Mexico in the US-American media.

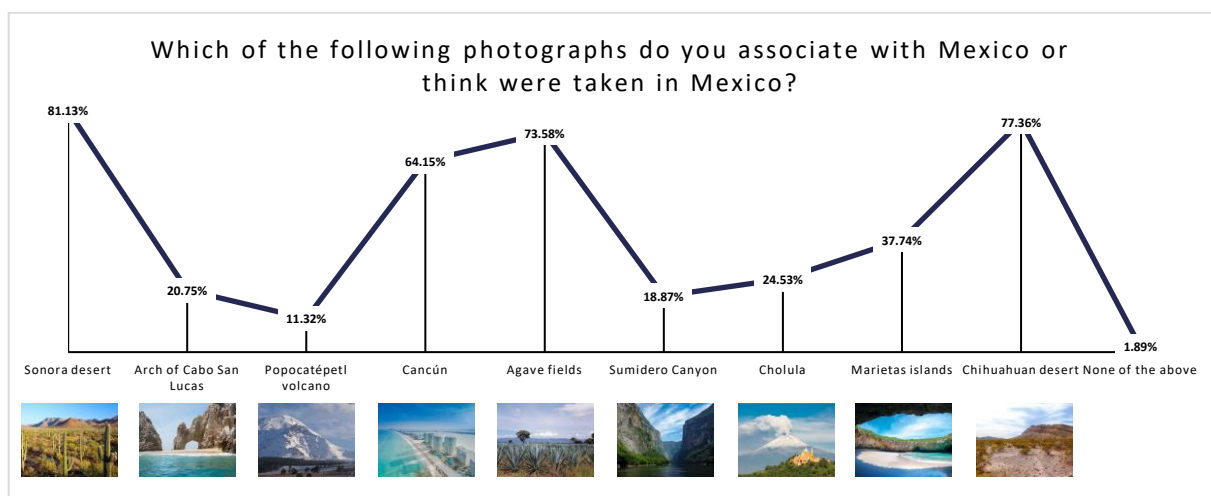


Figure 8.10. Picture association of Mexico's natural landscape and scenery.

For some participants, Mexico looks more relatable or familiar. Some places in Mexico resemble continental Europe due to their Spanish architecture. The two most selected pictures for the Urban landscape and scenery category were the cities of Taxco (58.49%) and Morelia (50.94%) (see Figure 8.11). Both cities were founded in the 1500s and still preserve their Spanish architecture. Modern skyscrapers in Mexico City's Santa Fe district (20.73%) and neoclassic Guadalajara's Degollado Theatre (9.43%) were the least selected. It is worth noting the very low number of responses to this question compared to the other picture association questions. It can only be concluded that the Magical Towns, which have predominantly Spanish architecture, would not offer anything extraordinary for half of the respondents. They said they would prefer to experience the indigenous side of Mexico and learn about its original peoples. Sadly, the inclusion of fully indigenous communities in the Magical Towns programme is low.

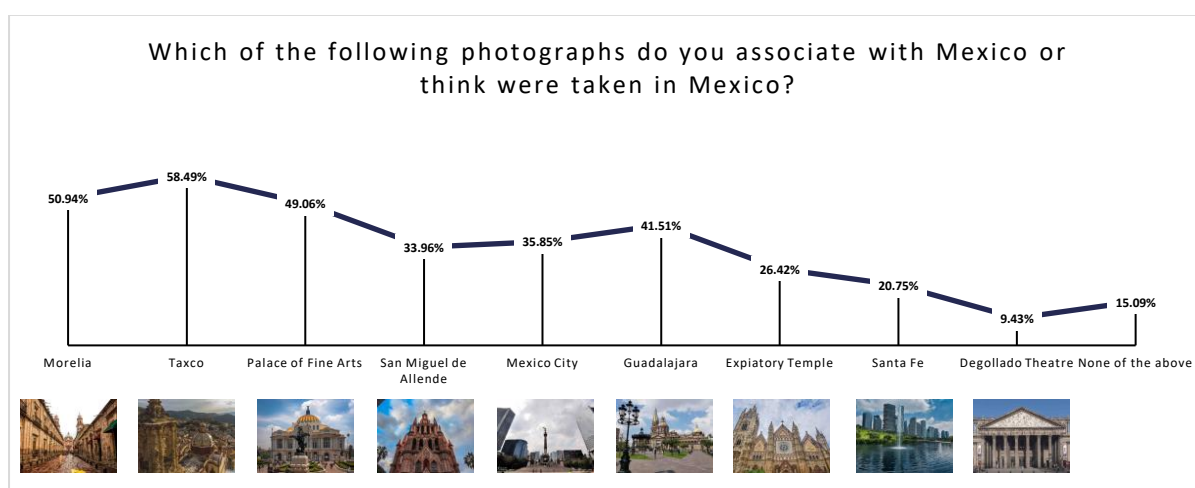


Figure 8.11. Picture association of Mexico's urban landscape and scenery.

For many participants, their impression of Mexico came not only from the US-American media but from the US itself. More than a handful of participants said that they have travelled to California, and the way it looks resonates with their idea of Mexican aesthetics. Particularly areas in southern California that once belonged to Mexico. For instance, San Diego is rich in Spanish architecture and Mexican celebrations and has a robust Hispanic population. The city's area known as Old Town San Diego has a 'Mexican atmosphere', with many Mexican restaurants, dance performances, and Mexican outlets selling gifts and souvenirs. For many participants, that is their closest experience to visiting Mexico.

In places like Old Town San Diego, the so-called Mexican aesthetics often fall into stereotypes that reinforce narratives. The imagery used in this place strongly promotes Mexico's national identity of being a mestizo nation represented by charro suits, sombreros, tequila, and mariachi music, leaving out much of the country's cultural diversity. The same formula is

commonly replicated in Mexican restaurants, celebrations, and many Magical Towns and tourist hotspots that reinforce the mestizo national identity to fulfilling the tourist gaze. That, in turn, constructs Mexico's country image.

Therefore, the same repeated iconography reinforces the publics' assumptions about Mexico. Intentionally or unintentionally, the frequent repetition contributes to the habituation of associating them with Mexico through a prolonged and continuous exposure to reinforcing ideas in a learning process (Williams, 1981, pp. 36-37). Participant 48 said: 'I guess the images we have seen and what we have been told is what we believe to be true, if we have never been to a place we rely on images and mediums'. Participant 56 said: 'I feel like those are the things you're kind of forced to think of Mexican culture (...) and as somebody who's not visited Mexico, those are the images (...) that would come to my mind'. The oversaturation of communicating the same elements does not contribute to further learning about Mexico beyond the same stereotypical iconography.

8.2.3 Sources for impression

Questionnaire respondents ranked the sources that helped form their impression of Mexico by order of importance. As per Figure 8.12, respondents ranked TV/Streaming services as the top impression source, followed by Films ranked in second place, confirming what has been previously discussed about the US-American media as their primary impression source. They ranked Internet/Social Media and Word of mouth in third and fourth place, respectively, reflecting the social influence of their peers. Finally, they ranked Books and Formal education and museums in fifth and sixth place, respectively. This theme looks at those six sources in depth, grouped into three categories: the media, word of mouth, and education.

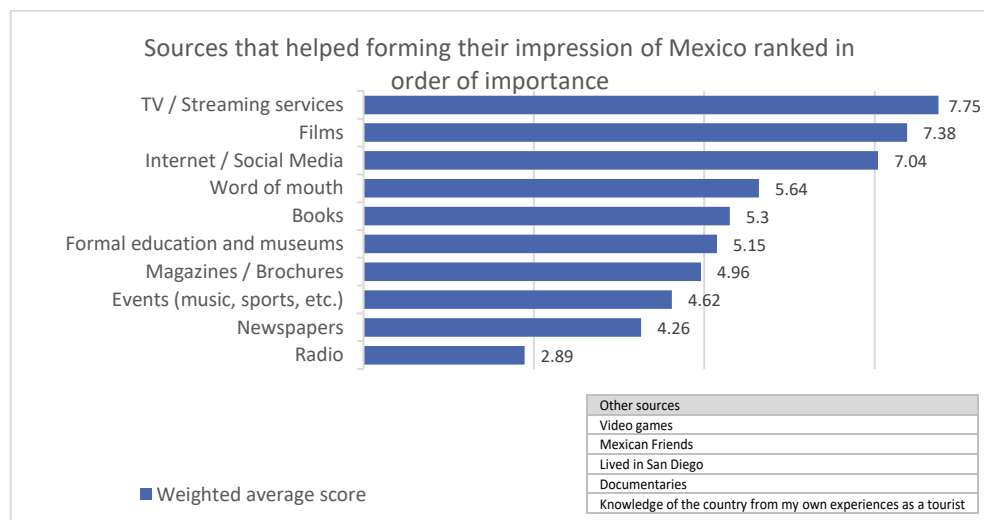


Figure 8.12. Sources of impression.

8.2.3.1 The media

Most of the impression participants get of Mexico comes from the US-American-dominated media. It comes mainly from television and films that portray Mexico from the American perspective. Usually, such representations include sepia filters and barren landscapes and portray issues like drug violence or illegal immigration. As per section 4.4, television shows like *Narcos* and *Breaking Bad* feed negative stereotypes. However, some good examples of positive representation that came up in the focus group conversations included the film *Frida* which portrays the life of artist Frida Kahlo, Telenovelas, which are popular dramas that usually show the everyday lives of wealthy characters and a constant mention of Disney's film *Coco* that presents Mexican traditions as colourful and full of music. From British television, three participants mentioned Rick Stein's *Road to Mexico* (2017), Sue Perkins' *Along the US-Mexico Border* (2020), and Karl Pilkington's *An idiot abroad* (2010).

Thus, the media plays an important part in forming participants' perceptions of Mexico. Potential visitors form their impression of the country based on such bits of information. As covered in section 4.4, the country has little to no control over the representation in foreign media and the news. Additionally, the language barrier seems to give the Mexican entertainment industry a limited distribution in the anglosphere.

8.2.3.2 Word of mouth

Another important source of information is word of mouth. Although most participants have not been to Mexico (73.58%), much of their impression was formed through relatives and friends who had been. Participant 56, for instance, said they had seen pictures from their friends and family who had been to Cancún on several occasions. They said they formed their impression based on such pictures and their family's experience. They acknowledged that their pictures and good experience differ from what is portrayed on television and in the US-American media.

Similarly, Participant 24 said that meeting Mexicans had been another way that shaped their views about the country. They said they have never been to Mexico, but they have found Mexicans friendly and welcoming: 'Much of my more-less stereotypical views of Mexico have come from meeting Mexicans in Europe'. Every Mexican living in the UK is an ambassador contributing to forming an opinion about the country.

Likewise, social media plays an important role. There are many Facebook and Instagram pages dedicated to promoting tourism in Mexico. Some are from tourist boards, others from private organisations, tour operators, and even travel influencers. The latter includes user-

generated content on platforms such as Instagram and YouTube, where participants said they usually see pictures and videos of Mexico's tourist sites.

For Sheldrake (2011), the Web 2.0 brought new ways of communicating and influencing each other. With social media and instant messaging platforms, message receivers interact, influencing each other in a digital word-of-mouth phenomenon. Impressions of Mexico are distributed when people share photographs, videos, and experiences visiting the country on social media. At the same time, people are exposed to the opinion of influencers, travel vloggers, and content creators that promote positive images and reviews about Mexico while providing helpful information.

8.2.3.3 Education

The primary sources of impression related to education are documentaries and books. Such documentaries cover various topics but are usually about Mexican food, culture, festivities, and US border issues, such as immigration and drug violence. Similarly, the books participants have read about Mexico are related to border issues, the Central American migrants having to cross through Mexico to reach the US, and drug cartels' conflicts. Despite such negative aspects reported through documentaries and books, participants did not consider Mexico negatively. They acknowledged that the country might have problems like any other country, but they also acknowledged that not all of Mexico has those problems and therefore do not think negatively about Mexico (see section 8.2.2.3).

8.2.4 Impression of Tequila

Before looking at participants' first impressions of Tequila, the questionnaire assessed their level of awareness with respect to the town. Figure 8.13 shows that the vast majority of the respondents (98.11%) said they have heard of Tequila before, and they know it is a drink. Only a small 20.75% recognised it as a place, though one participant confessed they would not have selected Place if it was not an option.

This is particularly relevant because Tequila has a great opportunity to capitalise on its name. The word tequila is well positioned among the general public as most people have heard of the drink, which also serves as the main attraction in the town. It is a more memorable word as it is short and easy to pronounce for anglophones, as opposed to the names of other Mexican places, such as Tlaquepaque (see section 6.2.4).

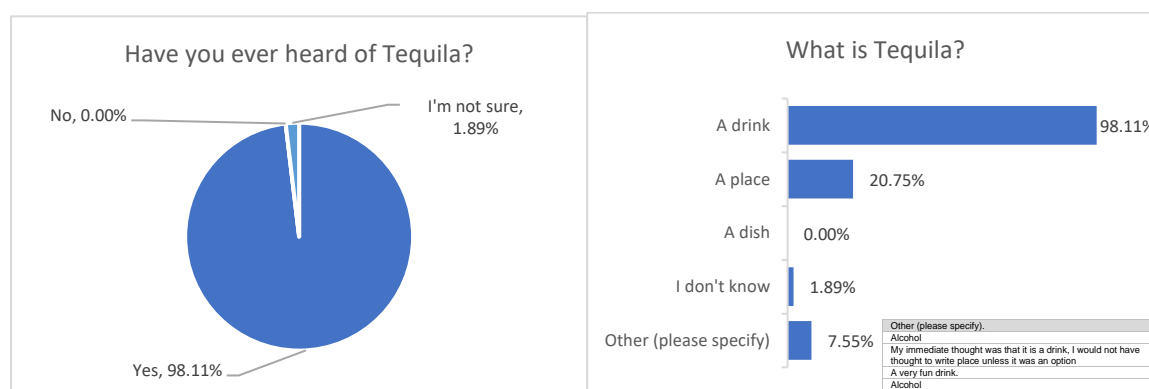


Figure 8.13. Awareness level regarding Tequila.

After looking at a series of photographs of Tequila, participants were asked about their first impressions of the town. Although responses varied due to the subjective nature of personal opinions, there was a highly favourable impression of the town. This theme looks at the positive and negative comments.

8.2.4.1 Positive impression of Tequila

There was a highly positive response towards Tequila's photographs. Repeated comments showed that participants were surprised to learn that Tequila was not only a drink but a place. Their first impression was that Tequila looked exotic, different from anything they were used to. They described it as a mix of traditional and contemporary looks, looking 'quaint and idyllic' and being 'aesthetically pleasant'. Many participants reported that it was a good surprise to discover that Mexico was more than beaches and parties.

Participants said that Tequila looks like a place they would like to visit. They said it looks like a place with natural areas and beautiful landscapes, 'very scenic and tropical' and that it would be a good experience going to the agave fields and learning about tequila-making. They considered that Tequila looks like a fun place with a lot to do and very tourist-friendly but 'in a theme park way'. However, they acknowledged that perhaps they would not spend all their time there.

To some participants, Tequila reminded them of wine towns and vineyards. Wine towns and enotourism are widespread in continental Europe, where visitors can visit a region and learn about the wine-making process by visiting the wineries and doing some wine tasting. This same concept has gained popularity in central Mexico. States like Queretaro offer different road-trip trails for wine and cheese experiences. Visitors can go to the vineyards stopping at different towns and wineries, which is exactly what stakeholders reported are trying to replicate in Tequila. Participant 5 said that Tequila looks more appealing than other wine towns:

The mix of images presents a town with history and culture and there are also several instances of working people. It appeals to me the same way whiskey houses in Scotland or vineyards in France would, but as it looks like a more working-class town it is more so appealing. I associate towns like that with better cuisine, richer culture.

This is particularly relevant for the local tourist industry. The perception of Tequila being a working class and rustic place reflects that their message is being received correctly. They are achieving an understanding with foreign publics who perceive Tequila as a small tranquil rural town with tourist attractions and distilleries. This not only reflects the intended image but evokes positive feelings awakening a travel intention.

8.2.4.2 Negative Impression of Tequila

Tequila was not interesting for all participants. Two participants said that Tequila was not outstanding and did not offer anything new to them. They said that ‘there was neither anything exciting or in particular boring about the place’, as it was, in their words, ‘just average’. Participant 6 said:

Nothing that I have never seen before, a traditional city with distilleries and crops with the plants that form Tequila. Wineries, distilleries is very common in my mind, same for the old ‘scenic’ cities. I wasn’t aware that Tequila is a city though, is something new to me.

Although the number of negative comments was small, there are two important points to consider. First, as stated earlier, Tequila replicates a concept popular in Europe; therefore, it is not something extraordinary for some European travellers. Second, that although it was not appealing to some of them, the sole fact of looking at the photographs contributed to learning that Tequila is not only a drink but a place. Therefore, Tequila has a lot of work to position itself and gain visibility.

8.2.5 Impression of Tlaquepaque

Tlaquepaque was regarded as highly unknown. Figure 8.14 shows that an overwhelming 84.91% of the respondents said they had never heard of Tlaquepaque, and 81.13% said they did not know what Tlaquepaque is. These results suggest that there is a total lack of awareness about the existence of Tlaquepaque.

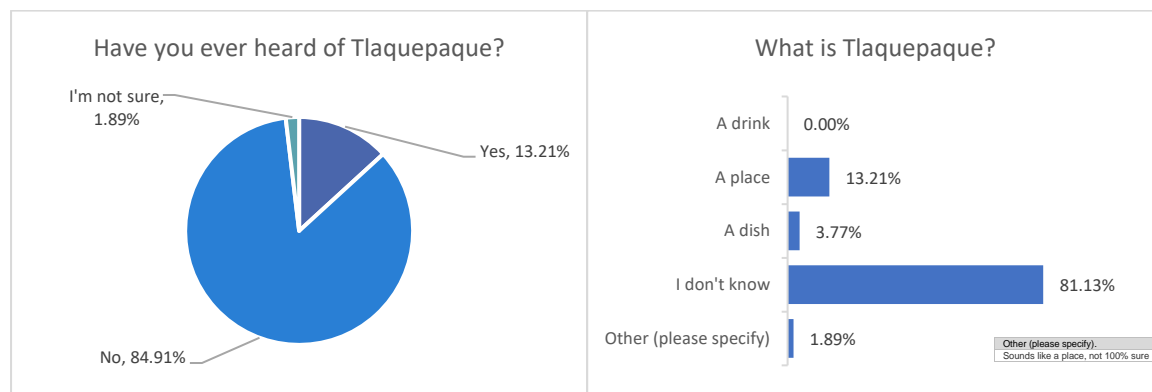


Figure 8.14. Awareness level regarding Tlaquepaque.

Unlike Tequila, Tlaquepaque's name seems to be less memorable. It is longer, has many repeated letters, and is hard to pronounce for anglophones. It has no association with anything relatable, as opposed to the town of Tequila with the drink. Therefore, it is more difficult to remember as it does not mean anything to potential visitors. This theme looks at their first impressions of Tlaquepaque after having the 360-degree video experience.

8.2.5.1 Positive impression of Tlaquepaque

On the positive side, similar to Tequila, participants said that Tlaquepaque looked like a place they would like to visit. After watching the 360-degree video, they said their impression was that Tlaquepaque is a town full of culture, food, and beautiful architecture. They said that Tlaquepaque looks colourful, traditional and welcoming, describing it as 'beautiful' and 'very picturesque'. Participant 48 said:

I feel Tlaquepaque is somewhere I am more likely to visit as it seems more like traditional Mexico, and I like to experience a country's culture when I go on holiday, rather than just sight see.

This reveals an initial willingness to visit places like Tlaquepaque among travellers who enjoy cultural tourism. Considering that Tlaquepaque was highly unknown for them before taking part in this study, the visual aesthetics shown in the 360-degree video seemed to have awakened a desire to visit the town (see section 8.3.2). This desire, however, highly depends on personal taste, and for this outcome to turn into an actual visit depends on a series of factors addressed in section 9.2.3, such as money and time.

8.2.5.2 Negative impression of Tlaquepaque

Similar to what happened to some participants when they looked at Tequila's photographs, a few of them did not find Tlaquepaque any interesting. They said they were not impressed as

Tlaquepaque looks average, poor, and like nothing that surprises them. Some of the few negative comments included participant 6 who said '(...) from the video there is nothing that attracts my attention. This is a small town with a church of some kind in the middle. Very common'. Then, said participant continued: 'this place has nothing but poor homes with pots and grass around'.

After having the 360-degree video experience, participants were unsure about the authenticity of Tlaquepaque. They said that Tlaquepaque might not be authentic Mexico but rather a creation for tourists. Participant 38 said: 'I can't decide if this is the real Tlaquepaque or if it is a manufactured image made to attract wealthy western tourists who want to experience "authentic" Mexico'. Participant 27 said: 'I got a good sense of place from this video but feel like it was definitely trying to "sell" an experience of visiting Tlaquepaque so was maybe less realistic or authentic'.

Other opinions were that the town looked relatively calm and would have preferred looking at more vibrant areas. One participant pointed out that the video's voice-over described Tlaquepaque as an artisan's community, and they could not see any of that. Participant 2 said: 'it was a shame that the streets were quiet, I would have liked to have seen more people as it would have made it more realistic, but I did like when the pigeon flew up in the park!'. Participant 44 said: 'The town had a very sedate feel to it. (...) it may have been nice to have seen one or two places full of people and activity. (...) Something that showed its vibrancy'. However, this situation has more to do with the production of the video than the town itself. Tlaquepaque is a bustling town, particularly in the afternoon and evening. To protect visitors' privacy, the video was intentionally filmed at very early times with little to no people around.

Finally, one participant said that although Tlaquepaque looks nice, it would not be their top choice for a trip to Mexico. That is, perhaps, due to many reasons preventing them from reaching these types of destinations, such as available connectivity, time, money, and other reasons addressed in section 9.2.3. It is understandable since the main tourist destinations like Cancún, Puerto Vallarta, or Los Cabos play with similar atmospheres and representations of 'Mexican culture', offering a similar experience to what they would find in Tlaquepaque. Therefore, Tlaquepaque should capitalise on its artisan heritage as one of its unique features and strengthen its promotional strategies to communicate the message that the town is worthy of visiting.

8.3 Promotion

The second theme looks at participants' reactions when looking at both photographs and 360-degree video. A glance at the answers to the question 'After looking at the photographs and the

360-degree video, which format do you think better promotes the towns tourism industry and why?’ revealed that there were more mentions of 360-degree video than photographs. However, this does not necessarily mean they consider it a better format. Since 360-degree video is the main topic of this study, it naturally received more mentions. Figure 8.15 shows a word cloud with the most repeated words in the answers to that question.



Figure 8.15. Word cloud of answers comparing photographs and 360-degree video.

Respondents used a Likert scale that helped assess the promotional material's effects. After looking at Tequila's photographs and Tlaquepaque's 360-degree video, respondents rated the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with a series of statements. As per Figure 8.16, there was a highly positive response to both promotional materials. Tequila's photographs obtained a higher number of Strongly Agree responses in the statements 'I would seek more information' (41.51%), 'I would consider visiting' (48.08%), and 'I would tell others and share' (28.30%). Though, Tlaquepaque's 360-degree video was higher in 'I would recommend visiting' (22.64%).

The desire to visit, in both cases, was almost equal in general terms. Despite the fact that Tequila received more ‘Strongly Agree’ answers in the ‘I would consider visiting’ statement when looking at the bigger picture combining the results of both positive answers (Agree and Strongly Agree), there was only a small difference of 2.07%. Such a small difference favoured Tlaquepaque’s 360-degree video, which, when combining the results of both positive answers, reached 92.46% of positive responses.

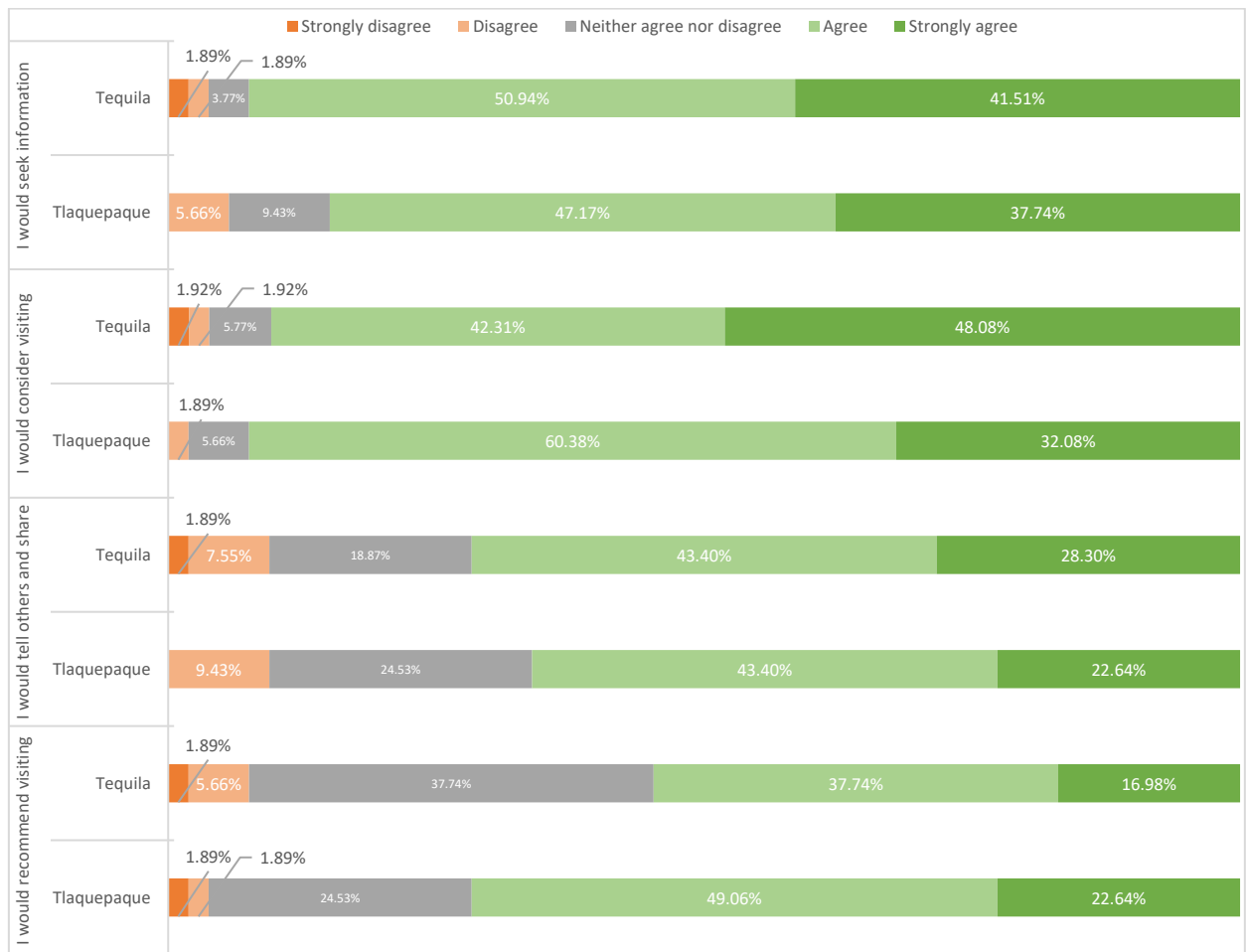


Figure 8.16. Effects of Tequila's photographs and Tlaquepaque's 360-degree video.

Similarly, to assess the effectiveness of the promotional material, participants evaluated both formats. As per Figure 8.17, the photographs were rated as Excellent for 'Held my attention', 'Got me interested', and 'Encouraged me to visit'. The 360-degree video was regarded as Excellent in 'Offered a realistic view', 'Was enjoyable', 'Amazed me', 'Taught me something' and 'Changed my views'. However, when combining the total Good and Excellent responses, both formats received equally positive responses for 'Held my attention' and 'Was enjoyable'.

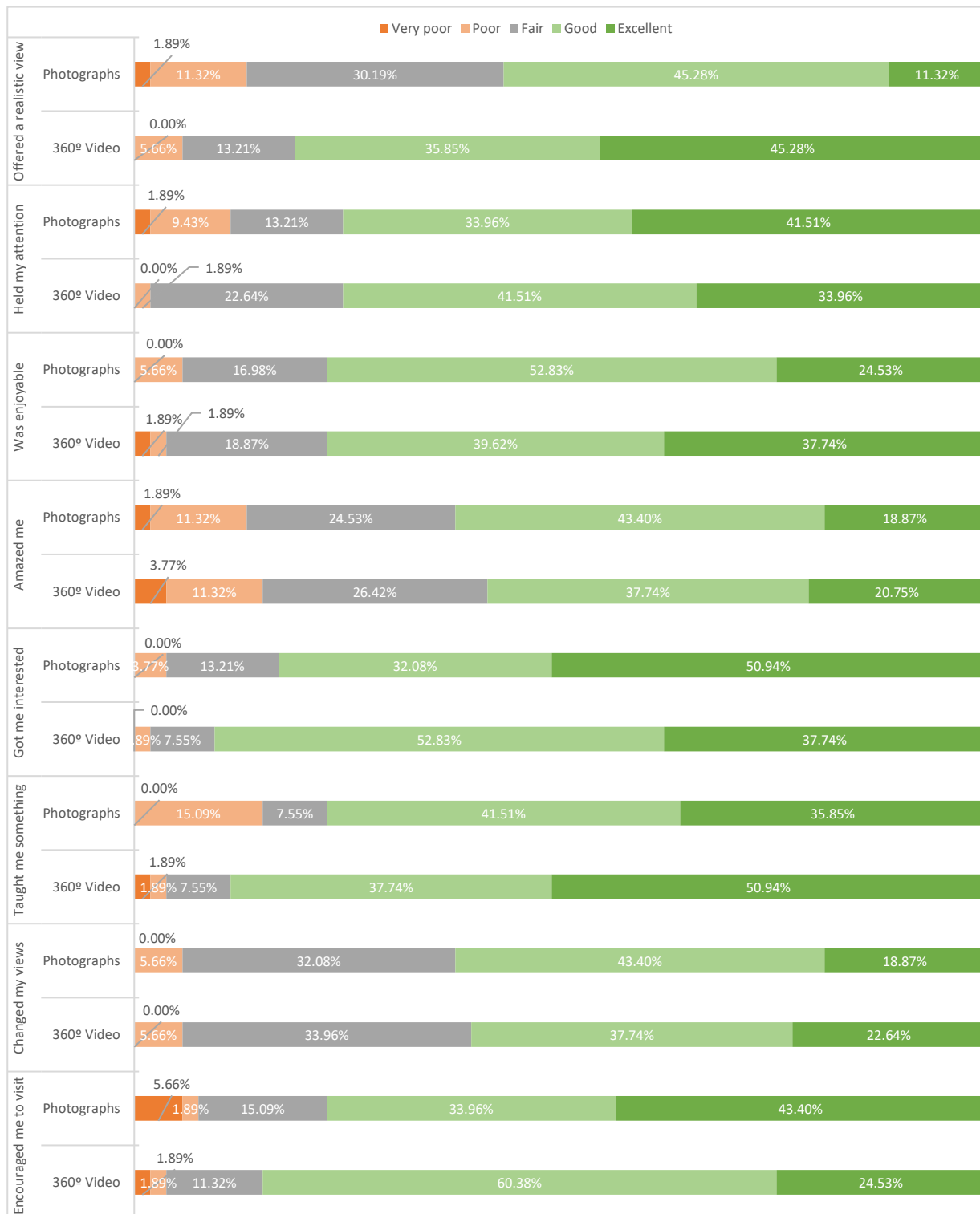


Figure 8.17. Evaluation of both formats.

This theme looks at the opinion of questionnaire respondents and focus groups participants regarding the effectiveness of using photographs and 360-degree video to promote Tequila and Tlaquepaque. It is subdivided into two subthemes, one looking at photographs and the other at the 360-degree video, with their respective subthemes. Both subthemes look at the reactions and comments that questionnaire respondents and focus groups participants had towards

Tequila's photographic material and Tlaquepaque's 360-degree video, respectively. See Figure 8.18 for reference.

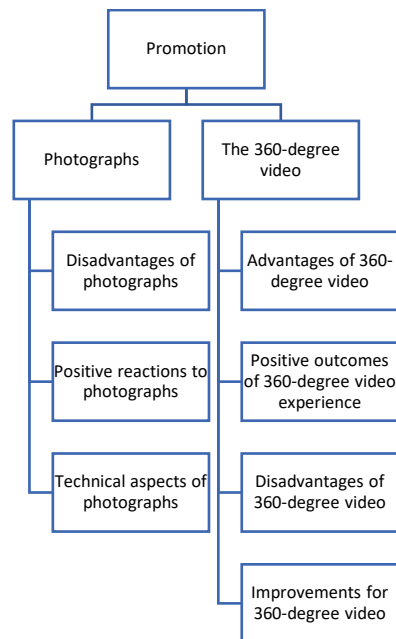


Figure 8.18. Thematic map of the theme Promotion.

8.3.1 Photographs

This subtheme looks at participants' opinions about Tequila's photographic material. A glance at the answers to the question 'Reflecting on your previous answers, why did you rate Tequila's photographs that way?' revealed that participants found it as a beautiful and interesting place to visit, relating it with the distilled drink and with a traditional, cultural, and historical atmosphere. Figure 8.19 shows a word cloud of the most repeated words in the answers to that question. This subtheme looks at their answers in further detail, and it is in turn subdivided into three subthemes, namely Disadvantages of photographs, Positive reactions to photographs, and Technical aspects of photographs.



Figure 8.19. Word cloud of reasons for rating Tequila's photographs that way.

8.3.1.1 Disadvantages of photographs

One of the disadvantages of using photographs to promote tourism is that they communicate limited information. Participants said that the photographic material offered them a good view of Tequila, but it did not provide further information. They said that photographs are good snapshots that can easily capture the city's spirit but are limited in the sense that they can only really engage through viewing them and, in many cases, get 'bored' of them very quickly. In their words, 'there's only so much you can get from a photo'.

They suggested having some information accompanying the photographs. The voice-over explanation in the 360-degree video helped them understand what they were looking at and triggered their curiosity. However, the photographs were missing appropriate information, and participants said that 'a bit of context would have helped'. For instance, participant 46 said:

By pairing the video with narration, I understood the significance of the locations whereas the photos alone made the location appear like any other town as there was no explanation of how they reflect the town's history of culture.

Therefore, its limited capacity to communicate information makes photographic material dependent on complementary messages. Using resources such as text, colour, shapes, and layouts could accompany photographs to send clearer and stronger messages. A good application for photographs could be to illustrate blog articles or publications with contextual information or accompanied by promotional slogans.

Moreover, photographs can be easily manipulated. They can be carefully selected, taken, or edited to represent an intended message. They can be carefully positioned in specific ways to frame only a positive side and hide the negative aspects of a place. Although photos helped participants learn that Tequila is a place and showed the good side of the town, many said this is not necessarily positive, as it does not present a realistic representation of the town. They said they should not entirely rely on what the photographs show as they present an idealised version of the place, a fantasy.

This, however, can be a good or a bad thing, depending on how things are seen. On the one hand, it could be good if the intention is to present a place in a good way that quickly catches the attention to promote tourism, as it could be very useful for triggering a desire to visit, awakening the spectator's curiosity to find out what the place is really like. On the other hand, it could be bad if the intention is to present a place more realistically, as this could lead to disappointments, inaccuracies, and false advertising. If the intention is to present a more realistic,

natural, and honest depiction of a place, 360-degree video offers a good alternative. Participant 44 said:

The VR gives a more ‘realistic’ and potentially authentic representation. However, when representations are less crafted they are sometimes less beguiling. For example, the composition of photographs are often carefully chosen, the colours, saturation, brightness etc all tweaked to make an image look as perfect as it can. There might be something mundane or unsightly just out of shot but in a photo all we see is perfection. Most know deep down a destination will not look like such photos. But their sculpted allure is often too enchanting and one can’t help but yearn to visit a destination. One doesn’t seem to have the same control over VR. For example, there may be blue sky in one direction, but clouds in another. I know this may sound risible, but I feel for some that may burst the fantasy that is conjured through the typical tourism photos / videos (where everything is as perfect as can be).

Additionally, photographs do not offer a sense of immersion. Participants reported that looking at a photograph does not provide the ability to feel a place. Participant 28 said that the 360-degree video was more vivid as they were able to look in different directions and see the pigeons flying and puppies passing by. All those elements provided a more detailed and realistic experience, communicating a stronger message.

8.3.1.2 Positive reactions to photographs

Within its limitations, Tequila’s photographs transmitted a sense of calmness, which woke participants’ interest. A common first reaction was that Tequila looked like a peaceful and friendly community. Participants said that photographs were really nice and were designed to make Tequila look aesthetically enjoyable for promoting tourism, eliciting thoughts of good food and drink, and a want to find out more. Participant 46 said:

The pictures were well lit, the yellow glow had a calming effect and portrayed the town as a safe destination. The photos of the scenery were beautiful, the buildings were maintained well and they appeared to be old yet aesthetically pleasing (they looked like chocolate box houses).

The photographs helped present Mexico differently. Participants said that they saw another side of Mexico, different from the representation they usually see in the US-American media. The photographs taught them something, as most of them did not even know that Tequila was a place. Although they acknowledged that they remembered more from the 360-degree video, participants said they would use more photographs if they were going to plan a trip to Mexico.

Despite the fact that photographs are static and offer limited information, participants said they got a glimpse of how Tequila looks and wanted to find out more.

Therefore, the good aesthetics shown in Tequila's photographs and its limited ability to communicate information created a favourable combination. That combination impacted three of the AIDA cognitive stages. It raised Awareness as participants learnt that Tequila was not only a drink but a place. It sparked Interest as the photographs transmitted a positive image of the town at the time its limited information made participants want to find out more. More importantly, it woke a Desire to visit Tequila and inspired participants to look at similar places to visit in Mexico.

8.3.1.3 Technical aspects of photographs

One of the advantages of using photographs over 360-degree videos to promote tourism is that they are very easy to distribute. Photographs are more readily available in comparison to 360-degree videos. They are quick to send, receive, consume, and refer back instantly, especially on social media, where users can save a Facebook post or bookmark it on Instagram. In contrast, to watch a 360-degree video, users must have adequate equipment for a proper VR experience. YouTube and Facebook can play 360-degree videos without needing a VR viewer, but it is not the same immersive experience as when using the right equipment. Therefore, each format has different uses and can be used for different aims.

Another advantage of the photographs over the 360-degree video is that photographs were of better quality. The 360-degree video lost quality for several reasons addressed in section 10.11, and it was not a homogenous experience across devices. All participants had different smartphones with different capabilities, screen sizes, screen resolutions, and Internet connection quality. Many participants reported the 360-degree video being blurry. The photographs, however, offered the same high resolution and similar quality across devices.

8.3.2 The 360-degree video

This subtheme looks at participants' opinions about Tlaquepaque's 360-degree video. A glance at the answers to the question 'Reflecting on your previous answers, why did you rate Tlaquepaque's 360-degree video that way?' revealed that, as opposed to what happened with Tequila's photographs, participants focused more on talking about their experience watching the video than describing the town. Figure 8.20 shows a word cloud with the most repeated words in the answers to that question, highlighting how participants said they found the 360-degree video an interesting and realistic experience. This subtheme looks at their answers in further detail, and

it is in turn subdivided into three subthemes, namely, Advantages of 360-degree video, Positive outcomes of 360-degree video, Disadvantages of 360-degree video, and Improvements for 360-degree video.



Figure 8.20. Word cloud of reasons for rating Tlaquepaque's 360-degree video that way.

8.3.2.1 Advantages of 360-degree video

One of the advantages of the 360-degree video is having a voice-over. Participants pointed out that in the 360-degree video, the voice-over provided useful information that helped them learn new things. They understood the importance of Tlaquepaque, and the voice-over explained to them what they were looking at. Participant 46 said: 'It was factual but did not overload me with information'. It also helped hold their attention, and the music created a tranquil atmosphere. In contrast, the photographs did not offer any information regarding Tequila. As previously discussed in section 8.3.1, photographs are more limited as a stand-alone form of communication, while 360-degree video incorporates other stimuli such as music and voice-over. This is particularly relevant since using different resources can help create specific atmospheres and depict Mexico in certain ways. The message then gets communicated.

The 360-degree video also provided a sense of freedom. Participants said that it gave them the freedom to look around and get a full view of Tlaquepaque. That not only contributed to a stronger feeling of immersion but of control. Participant 44 said: 'I enjoyed the control it offered and how it managed to evoke a sense of being there.' They had the ability to look at the town from different angles and not only at a statically framed photograph. Photographs can be framed to show something in particular, such as a street, a building, or one side of a place, when perhaps the rest is not that good. They brought up the example of the Giza pyramids and how photographs only show the majestic pyramids, when in real life, if they turn around, they would see the hustle and bustle of Cairo. Therefore, participants found the 360-degree video a more realistic depiction of a place. Participant 48 said: 'I see Tlaquepaque as a more real place, as I was

on street level, seeing it as it played at in front of me. My imagination isn't left to fill in what isn't shown.'

Participants regarded 360-degree video as an ideal format to promote tourism. Watching the 360-degree video turned out to be a novel experience for most of them. They said it produced a 'wow' effect that triggered their interest in knowing more about the place. Participant 27 said: 'It could be an incredible new way of promoting tourism, and I would be excited to see more, not just in Mexico but other countries around the world too'. The format of 360-degree video provides a preview of a place before visiting, a sort of 'try before you buy' as it allows viewers to get a real feel for what would be awaiting them if they ever visited. Participant 50 said: 'I liked the addition of the bands performance to get a taste of the area's "vibe" - it felt very relaxed and pleasant (...) as if I was actually there'. Participant 56 said:

360-degree video was fab! I think the advantage of photographs are simply time, it's quick but you can't really feel what the place is like or be immersed into the culture. Whereas the 360-video allows you to travel there to test the waters as to whether you'd like to go or not. The video can be trusted more than photographs! The video allows you to immerse yourself into the town, see the people and experience what it has to offer.

Overall, participants said that 360-degree video was better than photographs. It offered a novelty experience and more opportunities to look at a place with freedom and control. The element of novelty, however, could be a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it could be an element that attracts people who have never had a VR experience before. On the other hand, it could be a distraction. Participant 3, for instance, noted that since it was a new experience for them, they were distracted looking around and being amazed: '(...) I found the technology maybe more distracting, so I was so focused on moving around that I wasn't really paying attention to the words'.

8.3.2.2 Positive outcomes of 360-degree video experience

It appears that the level of immersion provided by the 360-degree video made participants more interested. The feeling of being in Tlaquepaque held their attention more than simply looking at Tequila's photographs. Participant 15 said: 'with VR I felt as if I was there to a degree, which made me more invested'. Similarly, participant 32 said: 'The VR video (...) was so much more interesting and made you feel like you were actually there. It was nice seeing the people walking down the street and the plaza. It made me feel like I wanted to actually be there and almost like I was there'. That sense of immersion is a key feature of 360-degree video that holds the

viewers' attention as an initial cognitive stage in the AIDA process, playing an important role in convincing potential visitors of a place's merits to awaken their interest and desire to travel.

The 360-degree video made participants want to visit Mexico. They reported enjoying the VR experience and making them want to visit. Some positive comments included: 'It inspired me to explore Mexico more' and 'Because I like and know Mexico a little bit, the video encouraged me to discover another town and place to visit in the future'. Participant 18 said that the video definitely achieved its objective:

I have never seen a video like this in VR, so the experience was really enjoyable. I really want to visit Tlaquepaque after seeing the video, so in this sense I think the video did what it was supposed to achieve. Similarly to the pictures, the video showed important clips that were pretty straightforward - we saw the weather, some beautiful landmarks and cultural activities that are important for me as a tourist.

Whilst the level of immersion held the participant's Attention, the 360-degree video also contributed to other AIDA cognitive processes. The whole experience raised awareness about the existence of Tlaquepaque. The voice-over sparked Interest in Tlaquepaque's history and artisan heritage, which, along with the images in the video, woke a desire to visit the town. All those attributes are key to succeeding with the intended purposes of the 360-degree video.

It is also clear that the 360-degree video changed their views of Mexico. The video challenged their preconceptions of Mexico being somehow dangerous and made them feel safe. The reason is that Tlaquepaque's video evoked feelings of calmness and of being a tranquil place. For instance, participant 43 said that the place looked safe: 'I think that it just seemed a lot more safe, and I think that was primarily because the aesthetics of the 360 video made it seem like quite an appealing place'. Perhaps what made Tlaquepaque look 'appealing' were the familiar European aesthetics. As addressed in section 8.2.2.1, it seems that participants do not conceive Mexico as a western country, so they were surprised at how European Tlaquepaque looked. Participant 49 admitted that the familiarity of the European look made them feel safe: '(...) it surprised me how kind of almost a European-like the towns looked and I suppose, that in itself, to me, made me feel safer'.

8.3.2.3 Disadvantages of 360-degree video

Having a VR experience requires too much effort. It requires having the right equipment, the correct video format, having the HMD on, and focusing 100% on it. The person needs to be actively engaged in the video as they cannot multitask while watching a 360-degree video. As participant 49 said: 'it is like going to the cinema, you need to focus on the film all the time'.

In contrast, photographs and traditional videos can easily be scrolled on social media or played on a split screen with multiple apps opened, being more readily available and accessible to a bigger audience.

When VR does not work correctly, it can reduce enjoyment. Many participants reported having issues with such a low-tech viewer provided for this study. Some of them said the video was blurry, the quality was not the best, and it was too complicated to set up. These issues could have resulted from several reasons addressed in section 10.11, such as having different screen resolutions and Internet connections. Participants reported that the cardboard VR viewers were uncomfortable and not ideal for a VR experience.

Using a cardboard viewer in this study presented significant disadvantages. It required too many steps and effort to assemble it, folding its sides, setting up a mobile phone, scanning a QR code, playing the video, inserting the phone in the viewer, and in some cases calibrating it. Some participants discouraged the use of cardboard viewers as it was ‘too complicated’. Participant 23 said: ‘(...) in my experience in this particular project it didn’t work so well so as a tourist I’d feel more excited about just a YouTube video rather than like the struggle of trying to get the cardboard headset to work’. However, this should not be a problem with modern VR HMDs such as Oculus, as they are easier to operate, fully functionally and autonomous. They do not require an external device (like a mobile phone) to offer a better-quality VR experience as they have a built-in screen, speakers, and Internet connection.

8.3.2.4 Improvements for 360-degree video

Some participants suggested that 360-degree video could work better without a VR HMD. That is, providing a monoscopic 360-degree video that can be manipulated with the computer mouse, the fingers on a touchscreen, or physically moving a smartphone or tablet in different directions without a VR viewer or HMD. That would not provide an immersive VR experience, but it would have an element of novelty and easy distribution on social media. Anyone with a smartphone could watch them without needing any extra equipment. Participant 49 said:

I sometimes see VR videos on Facebook, like sponsored videos or three groups, and I think that if something was coming up on my social media I think that’s the most likely way that I would interact with it, I don’t think I would normally think, at least to seek out a 360 video on YouTube if I was thinking of going to somewhere (...) but I think I’d be most likely if say, like the Magical Towns, if it came up as like a sponsored post on Facebook and it happened on these 360 videos, which not the VR ones, but you know the ones where you can just move your phone around that would probably be the easiest way that I would end up seeing it.

Since the publics are not actively seeking 360-degree video content, and not every household has a VR HMD, monoscopic 360-degree videos can be a good alternative to reach a wider audience. Promoting monoscopic 360-degree videos on social media would bring the content to their feeds. This would bring more exposure but sacrifice the immersive feature of the format.

They also said that the 360-degree video was very passive. Tlaquepaque's video, which was exclusively produced for this study, was a 360-degree video with no interactive elements such as a walkthrough or doors opening. Participants said it would have been a better VR experience if it had integrated elements they could interact with, as otherwise, they started to lose interest. Participant 7 said: '(...) We were just there in the same space for a while, we would just kind of wait a bit longer till we moved on to the next spot, so I thought, maybe at those points I was starting to lose a bit of my focus'. Suggestions included having the ability to choose which part of the town to explore next or which direction to go. Current VR experiences are limited to sight and hearing, with some of them incorporating controllers and gloves that can achieve a high level of interaction.

Participants recommended improving the shots shown in the video. There were divided opinions regarding the tranquillity of Tlaquepaque. On the one hand, some participants commented that it was a positive attribute. On the other hand, a group of participants said they would have enjoyed seeing many of the things mentioned in the voice-over narration. Tlaquepaque is a bustling town full of energy, music, and colourful streets. However, some participants said that the 360-degree video did not reflect that, and perhaps including shots showing the busy streets and vibrant atmosphere would have worked better. They said it was a bit static at some points and did not look much different from Google Street View. Participant 7 suggested:

(...) I think it might be quite interesting sort of have like... I don't know, those videos where it's like someone wearing a GoPro and they're kind of interacting with a local you know visiting vendors' and also (...) but if it was someone kind of walking along, and you're like acting as that person, maybe that would be more engaging.

Participants' opinions were focused on assessing that particular video used in this study but the format of 360-degree video is as flexible as traditional video. Their expectations and improvement suggestions varied, but that had more to do with the storytelling and specifics of the video than the format itself. Indeed, a big promotional campaign could include a series of 360-degree videos targeting different audiences with different narrations, shots, and styles.

8.4 Conclusion

Destination branding is vital for the Magical Towns programme. Tequila should capitalise more on its name as most people know about the spirit, the town's primary attraction and Tequila is short and easy to pronounce. Tlaquepaque's name seems less memorable than Tequila's, and anglophones find it difficult to pronounce due to its length and repeated letters. The word Tlaquepaque is not relatable to any goods, and therefore, it is easier to forget as it has no other meaning. Participants recognised Mexico's country brand more than the Magical Towns', which reflects a need for brand internationalisation.

The media plays an important role in shaping Mexico's image. Potential visitors' impression seems to come from US-American films, television shows, and news coverage, often portraying drug cartel conflicts and Mexican stereotypes. However, they generally see Mexico as an exotic and diverse place. They think of mariachi bands, charro hats, tequila, and other cultural attributes as being Mexican and unrelated to their Spanish origins. Therefore, they do not regard Mexico as a western country, affecting how safe or relatable they consider it. The repetition of these elements reinforces ideas and does not lead to further learning beyond stereotypes. Mexico has a range of destinations for all types of travellers, and promoting them, such as those in the Magical Towns programme, could help Mexico to show itself through tourism. Having a positive impression is key to constructing Mexico's country image, but the cultural differences and language barrier limit Mexican entertainment consumption in English-speaking countries. It is important to tackle ignorance and improve communication, as a successful campaign would depend on how educated the publics are. The upcoming FIFA World Cup 2026 and social media platforms could provide opportunities to improve Mexico's country image.

The limited capacity to communicate information makes photographs dependent on complementary messages. Photographs are helpful to illustrate publications with contextual information or promotional slogans. Despite being static and limited, Tequila's photographs awaken a desire to learn more. The perception of Tequila as a small, rural, and tranquil working-class town with distilleries reflect the message being received correctly. This impacted three of the AIDA cognitive stages. It raised Awareness as participants learnt that Tequila is not only a drink but a place. It sparked interest as the photographs transmitted a positive image and made participants want to find out more. More importantly, it woke a Desire to visit Tequila and inspired participants to look at similar places to visit.

Overall, participants said that 360-degree video was better than photographs. It offered a novelty experience, freedom, and control. The 360-degree video challenged their preconceptions of Mexico being somehow dangerous and made them feel safe. It appears that

Tlaquepaque's video evoked feelings of calmness, being 'appealing' and perhaps familiar for its European aesthetics. As participants' opinions focused on assessing a particular video, improvement suggestions were more related to storytelling than the format itself. The 360-degree video also contributed to the AIDA cognitive stages. The immersion level held the participants' Attention. The experience raised Awareness about the existence of Tlaquepaque. The voice-over sparked Interest in Tlaquepaque's history and heritage, and the footage woke a Desire to visit the town. For that Desire to become Action (a visit) depends on several factors, such as personal preference, money and time. Thus, a campaign could include several 360-degree videos targeting different audiences. Since potential visitors are not actively seeking 360-degree video content, and not everybody owns a VR HMD, monoscopic 360-degree videos can be a good alternative. Distributing them on social media would reach wider audiences but sacrifice the format's immersive feature.

Chapter 9. Potential visitors: decision-making and travel intentions

9.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the second part of a thematic analysis of the second data set focusing on potential visitors' perspectives. As explained in the previous chapter, the second data set combined the data obtained from the online questionnaire and the virtual focus groups. Participants were assigned a number when they received their participant's kit, and some questionnaire respondents were filtered and invited to participate in the virtual focus groups. This analysis chapter presents a single theme named Travel, divided into three subthemes: Planning, Sources of Travel Information, and Visiting Mexico. The analysis follows an explanatory sequential research design focusing on the qualitative data, using the virtual focus groups data to explain and draw practical conclusions regarding the online questionnaire results. This chapter, in particular, explores essential aspects of their travel decision-making and planning process.

9.2 Travel

This theme looks at participants' opinions regarding travel habits, decision-making, travel intention, and sources of information. It deepens on participants' responses to open-ended questions in the questionnaire and their opinions gathered from the focus groups. This subtheme looks at their answers in detail, and it is, in turn, subdivided into three subthemes, namely Planning, Sources of travel information, and Visiting Mexico, with their respective subthemes. See Figure 9.1 for reference.

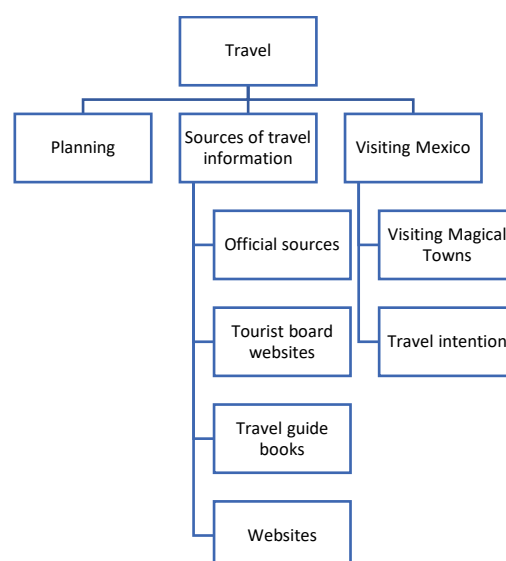


Figure 9.1. Thematic map of the theme Travel.

9.2.1 Planning

Every participant has their way of planning a trip. There were no common answers in this matter. Answers ranged from people planning a route with different ports of entry and exit so they can spend several days exploring different areas in a country, to people who do not plan at all and prefer the adventure of discovering a country on the go. All of them, though, agreed that they prefer organising everything themselves. They said that travel agencies tend to charge higher fees and have less flexibility in choosing different providers and finding better options. They all also agreed that it all starts with seeking information.

Different factors influence their decisions. Some participants decide based on what they read or watch on Wikipedia and YouTube. Others decide based on word of mouth and what they learn from their family and friends. Some other participants, however, confessed that they decide and plan their travelling based on budget and time. Participant 27 said that they start by looking on Google and websites like Skyscanner sorting flights by price to see where is cheaper to go to:

I usually look at my budget and then I look at Skyscanner and I just pick flights that are kind of within my budget. I kind of do backpacking trips more often, so I just pick a region based on where I can afford to go and I will usually then seek out information on those regions, I really like using wiki travel I think that's my favourite resource, it seems to be the most comprehensive. And if I'm still kind of not sure about things, I'm also a vegetarian so I'll look up like a lot of vegetarians have gone on in places and yeah that's usually my process.

Another important factor influencing their decision-making process is the tourist footprint and potential impact. Most participants said they mainly travel within Europe, preferring smaller places over big cities. They are also more conscious about sustainability and look at the right companies when visiting indigenous communities or consuming indigenous products. There is more awareness of generating a lesser impact as they prefer consuming from local tour operators and local businesses than global brands.

9.2.2 Sources of travel information

In order to take an informed decision, participants look at different sources of information. During their decision-making process, they look at official sources, websites, travel guides, tourist boards, and user-generated content, but there were divided opinions regarding the places to look for information. The vast majority of participants said that it all starts with a Google search, and then they go to websites like Wikitravel or TripAdvisor. Some participants said that

they try to avoid official tourist boards and travel guides like Lonely Planet as they always present very manicured pictures that sometimes do not reflect reality. Some other participants said they like reading user-generated reviews on TripAdvisor as they think they could find more value from the honest opinion of other travellers. However, some participants, like participant 23, avoid TripAdvisor at all costs, as these types of websites can be oversaturated and ‘(...) user generated are just so subjective, and just because you had a terrible experience at one restaurant very central doesn’t mean that everyone else is going to’. Therefore, there was no consensus about the preferred places to seek information. This subtheme looks at the different sources of information that they consider in their decision-making process.

9.2.2.1 Official sources

Most participants considered that official sources are more trustworthy than commercial sources. They acknowledged that promotional material on tourist boards or government websites might be edited, but they trust that they would not give false information. Participant 18 said that they do not mind if the pictures are slightly improved through the use of filters or light corrections: ‘they are going to be a bit done up but that’s normal I mean, no place is perfect, so when I go to visit the country, I know that is not going to be always perfect’. On the contrary, commercial websites like travel agencies or hotels would only present photographs and information that help sell products or services, which can sometimes present an altered reality. Participant 47 said:

I trust a government tourist agency website more than commercial websites, because a public body is going to be telling the truth, and it may be not objective and so that might be selective, but at least it’s not going to be lies, whereas some you know commercial websites like hotel chain websites have been known to really stretch the truth because there’s money involved, so I prefer the public funded bodies over for profit organisations I guess.

A handful of participants said that they usually look at the FCO website. They stated that they trust the information presented there and always look there for travel advice. They said it is helpful for official paperwork when travelling for work and for getting information about visas or immigration requirements for tourists. However, they acknowledged that the FCO sometimes gives generalised information on a macro scale. For instance, they may say that a country is dangerous due to drug violence or a common disease, but perhaps it is not affecting the whole country, and the part they are visiting might not be dangerous at all. This could be an

indication that the idea of negative travel advice halting international tourists from visiting Mexico could be wrong.

However, from all the official sources, they prefer looking at the local tourist boards. Participants said they would look at a local tourist board instead of a national one because the national one could be too broad, whereas the local one would offer more relevant information about a specific place. That is the case in small places like a Mexican Magical Town. A national tourist website might help find information about all Magical Towns, but a local tourist board will provide more accurate information if the visitor has already decided on one. However, tourist boards are not always well organised and sometimes do not present the information in the best way, as explained in the next subtheme.

9.2.2.2 Tourist board websites

Participants agreed that tourist boards present the information in a very dry way. For them, tourist board websites are not detailed enough. They offer limited information and limited resources presenting oversimplified information. Most of the time, they do not find things they are seeking, such as recommendations for restaurants or hotels, famous dishes, or hidden features of a place that are not mainstream. They said they are usually hard to navigate, not very organised and not very user friendly, which makes them take longer times to find the correct information. They get lost among many highly edited photographs and videos presenting unrealistically beautiful places. Although this is a generalisation, it is one of the reasons why they seek this type of information in other places, such as YouTube.

YouTube travel vloggers are an excellent alternative for getting honest and helpful information. Participants said they are one of the sources they look at when planning a trip. Travel vloggers usually embody the character of a friendly guide that processes the information for them and presents only the useful bits. They give helpful recommendations and work independently, providing more unbiased information. Participant 42 said:

One reason why YouTube travel is such a big thing is because it's actually driven usually by personality. You go to the tourist board website and it's just a load information, you're not connecting with facts, you're connecting with place through people and you don't... and I feel that tourist boards don't really... what's the best word... to show a best place without a presenter showing the place. But that's just my things if tourist board sets to use an actual person local to present the place I'll probably connect with tourist board information, a bit more.

Therefore, Mexico's tourist board and Secretariat of Tourism should keep providing organised information in user-friendly interfaces as they currently do with their owned media. After

a dispute for the VisitMexico website, and a lack of payment, the Secretariat of Tourism relaunched VisitMexico.com on 25 August 2020. The new platform promoted Mexico's tourism, integrated TripTuner technology and completely bilingual information. TripTuner is a tool that helps customise travel searches. With a filter that resembles a stereo equaliser, it gives personalised results based on the criteria set by the user (see Figure 9.2). The new website gathered information from all of Mexico's tourism products, multimedia content, and interactive maps. The TripTuner tool helped to organise the information in a very smooth, user-friendly interface, allowing what Kuksa *et al.* (2022) refer to as personalisation at the individual level but what Hermann (2021) calls mass personalisation assisted by technology at the higher level. However, new updates to the website do not include it anymore. Integrating technology like TripTuner and working in partnership with social media influencers and travel vloggers would strengthen their presence on paid, shared, and owned media.

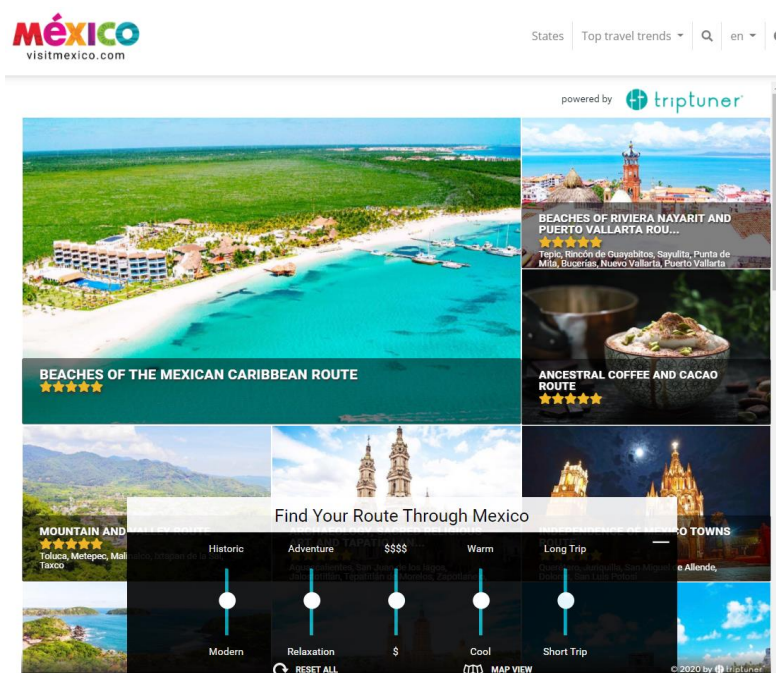


Figure 9.2. TripTuner technology was included in VisitMexico's website relaunch in 2020.

9.2.2.3 Travel guide books

There were divided opinions regarding the use of travel guides. Some participants say they enjoy travel guides like Lonely Planet, while others say they avoid them. However, those who enjoy them said they are never their first option. They usually look for information by searching on Google and referring to forums and videos. They consider looking at travel guides at a later stage once they have decided where they want to go and do. Participants said they look at travel guides for further ideas and information but not as a first source. Participant 15 said:

I go to Google first I would look generally for good places to go in Mexico, that simply on Google and then I sort of go into a web of following down forums and websites and such until I kind of locate the kind of location I want to go into. And then from there once I've decided that, I would probably if it's got... it actually this will probably information and where to go there and not to, I'll probably get like a Lonely Planet book as well, because I like having the kind of hidden areas within the city or wherever you want to go so, I find that very useful for you actually on the ground. But yeah, we locate first, then get the actual information I can use to make my trip worthwhile as possible when I'm there.

Travel guides are still an important part of tourism promotion. Lonely Planet's case is the best example of earned media for tourist boards and the industry. They are a group of independent writers that do not accept payments or gifts to be featured in the guide. Thus, being part of such publications should still be considered part of a global promotional strategy.

9.2.2.4 Websites

All participants do most of their planning online. Except for travel guides, they do not look at traditional media, such as radio and television, for travel information. They do Google searches first and then redirect to blogs, forums, and websites like Wikitravel and Skyscanner. Those who base their travelling on sightseeing and activities look at travel vloggers on YouTube as they give first-hand information and honest reviews of places and activities. Those who are more concerned about budget use Skyscanner and Airbnb tools to look for the cheapest options:

Skyscanner, once I start maybe planning a route, I might just look at Airbnb or something similar and find whether might be placed is cheap and then just sort of gravitate that area and see what's over there and then I might look at the local tourism sort of websites and try to figure out I've never heard of a town what's its history, what it's got an offer and that kind of thing.

Websites like VisitMexico are a reference for participants planning to visit a new country. Although some of them consider that they offer very dry information, others consider tourist boards a starting point. From there, they might look at the social media channels of such tourist boards or user-generated content. Facebook and Instagram are the preferred platforms. Participant 42 said:

I think I would start with Google on do sort of research about what there is there first, and you know if I find a website like you know visitmexico.com or something I might well expect to get broad brush information from their first side, and then I look for information from friends yeah, do I know anyone who's been to a country or a place on social media like Facebook, and then sort of figure out what I'd like to do first and then

things start thinking about whether I can afford to do what I want to do after that, if it turns out, I can't afford it then put something on the back burner and look for something I can afford.

Therefore, all types of digital media should be considered when planning a promotional strategy. From paid influencer marketing to earned YouTube reviews, shared social media content, and owned tourist board websites. Whilst there is little to no control over earned and shared media, Mexico's tourism authorities and industry leaders should focus on their paid and owned platforms where they can control the information distributed.

9.2.3 Visiting Mexico

Although many participants agree they would like to visit Mexico, many factors intervene. In order to take the cognitive process of Desire and transform it forward into Action, a decision should be made. Sometimes, such a decision depends on money, time, or priorities. There is, however, nothing that any promotional campaign could do about it as it solely depends on external factors. This subtheme looks at the factors taken into consideration when intending to visit Mexico and the willingness to visit towns that are part of the Magical Towns programme while visiting the country.

9.2.3.1 Visiting Magical Towns

After looking at the photographs and having the VR experience, focus group participants said that Mexico's Magical Towns are something they would be interested in visiting. They all agreed they would prefer visiting small towns over big cities or beach resorts. Participant 49 said: 'Mexico has never been particularly high on my bucket list but partly because I associated it more with beaches and resorts and the big cities and less so with towns like Tequila and Tlaquepaque'. That only further suggests a lack of awareness about the Magical Towns programme and Mexico's tourism beyond the resorts, which could be highly interesting for tourists looking for different experiences.

In that sense, the Magical Towns programme is an excellent opportunity to diversify tourism. It could become a guide for foreign visitors unaware of the country's destinations beyond beach resorts. The programme groups a series of towns under an umbrella brand that could serve as a travel list for visitors who do not know where to start. Participant 23 said that the Magical Towns Programme could be a great list of recommended places for cultural tourism, as it lists places that they otherwise would probably never know about:

Mexico's never really been high on my list or really anywhere in South America, like any of that side. So, I wouldn't know other than you know Mexico City, I really wouldn't know where to go, and I think something like Pueblos Magicos would actually help me decide which ones to go to. I've done this in Italy with their most beautiful towns system which is pretty much the same as Pueblos Magicos as far as I can understand. And you know we basically we didn't know where to go, other than the big cities, so we were in southern Italy and we just opened the most beautiful town website and just pick from there and it gave us a bit of a structure, and I think if I would almost probably do, then that's just my personal experience, but I would almost do that with Pueblos Magicos because I don't really know where else to go.

Therefore, a promotional campaign is not only beneficial but needed. There cannot be an internationalisation of the Magical Towns programme without promotion. The Mexican tourism authorities and industry should raise awareness about the programme's existence and the towns. Creating a travel list similar to many existing trails, such as the trail of cheese and wine in Querétaro, or the Tequila Trail in Jalisco, could incorporate a Magical Towns trail, subgrouping them into different categories. Still, other factors would determine whether this is feasible for international tourists, such as connectivity and distance between towns.

9.2.3.2 Travel intention

One of the most important things to take into consideration is money. All participants agreed that they perceived Mexico as an expensive country. They said that taking a long-haul flight from the UK to Mexico is expensive and not something they could afford to do very often. Therefore, they said they would carefully choose where to go and what to do. Participant 15 said: 'I think if I go there, I want to make sure that I'm going to the right place'.

In that sense, Mexico's Magical Towns might not be the first places a first-time visitor would go to. The fantastic offer of cheap flights within Europe and the wide variety of cultural tourism make small European towns more attractive for British travellers. The programme seems to work very well for US-American and Canadian visitors because of the short distance. Tequila and Tlaquepaque are excellent cultural spots while travelling in Mexico. However, for British visitors is a little bit more complicated. Mexico is far away, and for a British traveller to get to know Magical Towns, they must have exhausted other (and perhaps more relevant) places. Participant 15 said:

I guess it would be different if I was living somewhere in America, but obviously I'm not, so I think personally for me as a UK traveller, you know the... yes, I think I would go to Tequila, but only after I really sketched out and seeing that I could make the most of it because I had spent so much money to get there, to begin with.

Similarly, another thing they would consider is transportation within the country. They said that one of the things they look at is accessibility in terms of distances and transportation from major cities to Magical Towns. Distances play an essential role when visiting Mexico since it is a big country, and it is expensive to get there. If a traveller has limited economic resources and time, they would not want to spend it moving from one place to another. Participant 47 said that to make it worthwhile, they would consider staying for a longer time:

The other thing, apart from budget that nobody's mentioned by this time, it does take a long time to go trans-Atlantic so firstly you'd want to go for a decent amount of time in a week or 10 days to make it worth, spending two days traveling and the two days getting over jet lag when you're there. And the other thing is the getting around foreign countries, especially big ones is a problem, because if you're there for a week, if you are going to relocate to one or two other towns, besides the major airport hub, is that going to eat one or two more days of your holiday? in which case you're only going to get three four days of actual holiday for a week of a transatlantic holiday so that's a big factor, and when I'm deciding where to go. How easy and quick is it to get to places? Can I go on the plane? That's another thing, to either flying around the country, or rather travel.

Therefore, visiting Mexico and any of the Magical Towns is not easy. For European visitors, it requires effort, money, time, and willingness. Yet promotional material such as photographs and 360-degree video could help within its own limitations. Promotional material could only help in three of the four cognitive stages of the AIDA process by raising Awareness, sparking Interest, and awakening a Desire to visit. The final decision to take Action and visit Mexico and its Magical Towns is beyond the scope of any promotional campaign.

9.3 Conclusion

This chapter presented a single theme focusing on potential visitors' planning, decision-making, and sources of information. It appears that each potential visitor has their own approach to planning a trip. The research findings ranged from the deliberate selection of multiple entry and exit points (to explore diverse regions within a country) to an absence of planning altogether in favour of the excitement of spontaneous discovery. Participants showed a preference for self-organising their trips, and they initiate this process by conducting online research. Thus, information availability is crucial. The use of technology, collaboration with social media influencers and travel vloggers would enhance Mexico's presence across paid, earned, shared, and owned media.

It appears that all participants engage in online planning. Except for travel guides, traditional media such as radio and television are not typically consulted for travel-related information.

Individuals typically start by searching on Google, followed by online resources such as blogs, forums, and specialised websites like Wikitravel and Skyscanner. Tourist board websites, such as VisitMexico, serve as a reference for individuals planning to visit a foreign country. Subsequently, they may examine said tourist board's social media platforms or look at user-generated content, being Facebook and Instagram the most used platforms. Hence, it is imperative for the Mexican tourist board and Secretariat of Tourism to continue providing information through user-friendly interfaces in their owned media platforms.

Individuals who prioritise sightseeing during their travels often rely on YouTube travel vloggers. Vloggers provide first-hand information and honest evaluations of destinations and activities. They can be an alternative or complement to official tourist board websites as they usually personify a friendly guide who filters the information delivering only the highlights. The recommendations they provide are helpful, and they are often seen as independent, having a perceived greater degree of impartiality. Hence, it is imperative to consider all forms of digital media in promotional strategies. From paid influencer marketing to earned reviews on YouTube, shared content on social media platforms, and owned tourist board websites. Since there is little to no control over earned and shared media, Mexico's tourism authorities and industry leaders should focus on their paid and owned platforms.

The Magical Towns programme is an excellent opportunity to diversify the tourism industry and become a guide for foreign visitors unaware of the country's tourism destinations beyond resorts. The programme groups a selection of towns under an umbrella brand which may function well as a travel list or a compilation of suggested destinations for unfamiliar visitors seeking guidance on cultural tourism, providing an opportunity for individuals to explore locations that may have otherwise remained unknown to them. However, the Mexican tourism authorities and industry leaders should raise awareness about the programme's existence and the designated towns. Promotion is vital for its internationalisation. Creating a travel list like the existing trails, such as the trail of cheese and wine in Querétaro, or the Tequila Trail in Jalisco, could incorporate a Magical Towns trail, subgrouping them into different categories.

Travelling to Mexico and the Magical Towns can be challenging for European visitors. It requires effort, money, time, and willingness. Promotional materials such as photographs and 360-degree video may have some potential benefits within their limitations. They are limited to helping three out of the four cognitive stages of the AIDA process by raising Awareness, sparking Interest, and awakening a Desire to visit. The final determination to take Action, visit Mexico and explore its Magical Towns transcends the ambit of any promotional campaign.

Chapter 10. Discussion and conclusions

10.1 Introduction

This thesis evaluates the effectiveness of using 360-degree video to promote Mexico's cultural tourism. It focuses on the Magical Towns programme, which groups a series of towns with specific characteristics under an umbrella brand marketing it as a cultural tourism product. This chapter discusses the research question 'to what extent can 360-degree video help to promote Mexico's Magical Towns as international tourist destinations?' by drawing on conclusive ideas. It first answers the research question. Then, it provides a discussion framed by the aims and objectives set out in Chapter 1, considering final thoughts and conclusions. It then proceeds to acknowledge the applicability of this study's results on a broader scope giving recommendations for a real-life scenario. It states the study's contributions and discusses future research opportunities and technical considerations for future 360-degree video production.

10.2 Answer to the research question

A single research question drove the study through four aims with their respective objectives. The research question 'to what extent can 360-degree video help to promote Mexico's Magical Towns as international tourist destinations?' was addressed by looking at PR, technology, and tourism. This study aimed to explore the potential of 360-degree video in promoting Mexico's cultural tourism by considering aspects of those three fields. The study looked at the Magical Towns programme, its potential for internationalisation, and the promotion opportunities using such technology by having a case study approach on two towns with the Magical Towns designation: Tequila and Tlaquepaque.

Although 360-degree video is a novel promotional tool that can significantly contribute to constructing Mexico's country image and reputation by depicting places such as the Magical Towns, the preference for more straightforward promotional material, such as photographs, would prevail. Therefore, the implementation of 360-degree video should be part of an integral approach and not used as a stand-alone promotional tool. That is because it requires much effort, knowledge, and the appropriate equipment to watch a 360-degree video in a VR experience. One argument could be that until every household owns a VR HMD, and the average user adopts this technology, this could not be considered a mainstream promotional tool. However, it is quite likely that VR itself will be replaced by a new technological development that is more user-friendly, and so the implementation of immersive moving images would be much more

accessible. Therefore, marketers and PR practitioners should be able to adapt this study's core principles and findings into whatever format or technological development the future holds.

Finally, there seems to be a genuine interest among potential UK visitors to discover more about the Magical Towns programme. However, regardless of how effective 360-degree video is in promoting cultural tourism, external factors such as time, distance, and price could prevent potential visitors from visiting towns in the programme. Thus, designated towns, such as Tequila and Tlaquepaque, should consider preserving their authentic heritage and what makes them unique to strengthen their attractiveness and promotional activities.

10.3 The role of marketing communications and PR in destination promotion

Marketing communications and PR are key to destination promotion. Marketing strategies follow the marketing mix, combining the 4Ps of Product, Price, Place, and Promotion. The fourth P –promotion– is marketing communications (CIM, 2017, p. 112), defined as the process of sending messages to persuade and provoke a targeted audience to modify their behaviour by promoting a product's positive features (Fill and Turnbull, 2016, p. 13). The promotional mix contributes to destination promotion by improving communication with potential visitors and integrating tools like advertising, sales promotion, PR, direct marketing, personal selling, and digital marketing on social media (Fill and Turnbull, 2016, p. 11; CIM, 2017, p. 112; Kotler and Armstrong, 2021, pp. 410-411). PR, in particular, uses events, electronic, editorial, and publications through Paid, Earned, Shared, and Owned media to promote tourism (Dietrich, 2014).

Chapter 2 investigated the general theoretical background of destination promotion by reviewing Relationship, Social Influence, and Mass Communication theories. Particularly, classic theories included that of Jefkins (1994), who developed a 'Transfer Process' to convert hostility to sympathy, prejudice to acceptance, apathy to interest, and ignorance to knowledge (Duhé, 2007, p. 290). Contemporary theories included that of Sheldrake (2011), who proposes a communication model that explores people's social media behaviour, where two-way symmetric communication is more present than ever. Likewise, Chapter 2 explained the framework and country image model developed by Buhmann (2016). He proposes differentiating country identity, brand, image, and reputation from the perspective of their construction. While country identity and country brand are based on the country's citizens' self-perception, country image and country reputation refer to the foreign publics' perception. These definitions and theories guided the thesis and were particularly useful for developing this study's methodology and analysis.

Technology has transformed the tourism industry, its promotional strategies, and stakeholders, including the tourists (as reviewed in section 3.4). Today, tourists have access to larger sources of information and are more knowledgeable about destinations. They can share opinions about destinations, hotels, airlines, restaurants, and tours through YouTube videos and TripAdvisor reviews, as addressed in sections 6.3.2 and Chapter 9. It appears that the influence of that user-generated content in the decision-making process has made it an essential part of destinations' success. Promotional strategies have therefore evolved with these changes. QR codes, for instance, can now integrate offline promotional material with online platforms. Social media platforms have incorporated new content formats, forcing advertisers and PR practitioners to adjust to new video standards developing mobile-friendly vertical videos. Similarly, practitioners have adapted to TikTok's content-creation model, which requires much creativity to stand out in a platform that feeds users with personalised content, and they are integrating persuasive messages into VR experiences in at least five ways (as explained in section 2.2.5). Tourism marketers and PR practitioners are leveraging new technology to promote destinations, and Mexico is strengthening public engagement through visual social platforms like Instagram and YouTube.

10.4 Mexico's country image and tourism promotion

Chapter 4 reviewed Mexico's identity and branding. After over a decade of armed conflicts in the Mexican Revolution, the constitution of 1917 attempted to unify and bring stability through new nationalistic ideals (Knight, 1990a; Hellier-Tinoco, 2011, p. 56). They started shaping a national identity through the arts, music, literature, and education. Philosophical and intellectual movements like *Indigenismo* revalorised Mexico's indigenous heritage, while *mexicanidad* and *lo mexicano*, became umbrella terms for what is genuinely Mexican, acknowledging Spanish and Indigenous American origins in a single mestizo identity, which is neither indigenous nor European but quintessentially Mexican. Both movements brought self-awareness of racial, social, and class aspects that were seen as authentic expressions of Mexican culture reflecting an identity resulting from the *mestizaje* (Hellier-Tinoco, 2011, p. 26; Gaytán, 2017, p. 67). This created national identity has been promoted as Mexico's self-representation and branding ever since. The survey results and analysis presented in section 8.2.2 suggest that potential visitors also perceive elements of the mestizo identity as being 'Mexican'.

Section 4.4 reviewed Mexico's country image and representations in the US-American media. Mexicans were long portrayed as retrograde, violent, barbaric, hedonistic, and dishonest (Anderson, 1998, p. 27; Lindsay, 2019, p. 25). After the US alcohol ban, the reputation

improved with an increasing interest in visiting Mexico. US-American artists and intellectuals travelled to Mexico to explore the country and study the impact of the Revolution and its indigenous past (Delpar, 1992, p. 15; Gaytán, 2017, p. 71). During WWII, the Good Neighbour policy became a propagandistic tool to improve relationships in the Americas. WWII represented a common war goal between the US and Mexico, and war propaganda portrayed both countries as good friends (Berger, 2010, p. 116; Panosso and Trigo, 2015, p. 12). With the increase in drug-related violence, drug trafficking, illegal immigration, and the rise of far-right President Trump promoting hate speech, US-Americans started to look at Mexico as a dangerous place again (Velázquez, 2008). These representations have impacted the way the world sees Mexico. As explored in section 8.2.3, potential visitors acknowledged that their impressions of Mexico come from the US-dominated media. However, tourism has become a window to Mexico's reality.

Mexico is one of the world's most visited countries, and the UK has become the third biggest market, just after the US and Canada (SECTUR, 2018a, p. 40). With diverse landscapes, culture, archaeological sites, historical monuments, weather, infrastructure, and a mature model for developing state-run seaside destinations, tourism contributes an average of 8.7% of Mexico's annual GDP (with a sudden drop to 6.7% in 2020 due to the Covid-19 pandemic) (INEGI, 2021). The country has a well-established tourism model based on a dominant seaside offer in Integrally Planned Centres. FONATUR built the first Integrally Planned Centres, drawing tourism away from the busy cities and shaping Mexico's current model of seaside destinations (Lindsay, 2019, p. 25). This model proved to be successful in places like Cancún, and Los Cabos, as a tool for the regional economy and well-being, increasing employment and long-term investments by supplying a business model based on the public and private sector collaboration. However, the Integrally Planned Centres have caused environmental damage such as beach pollution, landscape transformation, and water contamination. Mexican tourism authorities have long strategically diversified Mexico's tourism by capitalising on cultural tourism.

As addressed in section 4.5, Mexico began capitalising on cultural tourism in the 2000s. Since then, capitalising on Mexico's cultural heritage has been a common practice by those that protect it. They organise festivals and contests showcasing indigenous folklore, promoting and preserving traditional values of festivities and customs, especially music and dance, and disseminating the country's cultural heritage internationally. However, the rural communities, indigenous, and Afro-descendant populations, in which such traditions have their origins, tend to be marginalised and have limited access to such resources and events (Flores and Nava, 2016, p. 12). Cultural destinations are often created on-demand as scenic products, a show that plays daily in situ, showing the visitors what they expect to see. The Magical Towns programme

attempts to reflect and promote Mexico's diverse cultures, but it often falls into replicating its mestizo identity and caricaturing the local culture.

10.5 The Magical Towns programme and Mexico's cultural tourism

Section 4.6 reviewed the Magical Towns programme, created in 2001 by the Secretariat of Tourism. This programme has evolved as a tourism diversification strategy over the last twenty years. It has grown and evolved, changing its regulations, processes and requirements, adapting to the needs and context of four administrations. Today, it incorporates 132 towns with various attractions and historical and cultural features, structuring a complementary offer towards the country's interior. It also boosts the economic growth of the towns through public policies delivered by the three levels of government, allowing the interaction between stakeholders and society (Madrid, 2014, p. 271). Sections 4.6.6 and 7.2.2 addressed criticism and negative opinions, such as the lack of transparency, corruption allegations, elitism, political issues, and budget cuts.

By becoming a Magical Town, the town's infrastructure improves, attracts private investment, and grows the local economy. Initially, the programme provided funding to improve the quality of public services such as electricity, running water, sewage, and waste management. However, the programme is now a branding programme, and towns need better management of their resources and increased participation from the private sector. Despite this, the towns involved in the programme appear to have made progress in reducing social inequality. Both Tequila and Tlaquepaque seem to have adapted to their post-industrial realities where they not only produce goods, but many of the towns' productive activities are now intrinsically linked to offering services in the tourism industry (as per section 7.2.1). As a result of developing and improving a tourism industry, the towns maintain and increase employment, as more people can work in the sector and business opportunities are greater.

Sections 4.6.3 and 7.2.1.4 showed that one of the programme's main benefits is obtaining the right to use a nationally recognised brand for its tourism promotion. The Mexican Institute of the Intellectual Property declared this brand a 'famous brand' as 9 out of 10 Mexicans know it (Puga, 2017). The Magical Towns brand is a synonym for good cultural destinations, making a place more attractive for visitors. The stakeholders' opinion analysis in section 7.2.1.4 showed that they acknowledged the importance of brand usage rights. As per section 7.3.1.1, it appears that Tequila uses the brand, but Tlaquepaque remains at an early adoption stage. However, section 7.3.1.2 showed that there is little to no promotion of the Magical Towns programme. The promotional activities are limited to fairs and events targeting national tourism and some

online presence. Section 8.2.1 showed that potential visitors residing in the UK ignore the brand and the programme. This is perhaps due to the lack of information in English, which is crucial for achieving the programme's internationalisation. Furthermore, there is a high risk of brand dilution if more towns are admitted to the programme. The more towns are included in the programme, the less special they become.

Chapter 6 and Chapter 7 presented a thematic analysis of Tequila and Tlaquepaque. The analysis focused on the towns' evolution, promotional activities, visitors, communication issues, and perceived benefits, among other themes. The analysis concluded that there seems to be a significant disparity in whom the promotion efforts benefit. In both towns, the programme has been driven by the private sector and controlled by a business elite. While Tequila residents do not benefit much from all the promotion that big distilleries like José Cuervo tequila do, the big distilleries benefit from the few promotion that the Departments of Tourism, Tourist Boards, local businesses and the Secretariat of Tourism do. The tourism authorities' promotion raises awareness, and when tourists look for things to do in Tequila, they are directed to José Cuervo, their range of activities in Mundo Cuervo, and other distilleries. In Tlaquepaque, a *de facto* group of business owners was created due to the local government's lack of leadership and guidance. It gained more power than the actual Magical Towns committee taking over the tasks that the official committee should do. There seems to be little to no coordination between the private sector and the local government.

In both towns, restaurants and cantinas became windows to Mexico's culture and traditions, offering variety shows of mariachi music and folk dances, decorated with folk art and colourful banners, and serving authentic Mexican food in a 'Mexican' atmosphere. Such iconic elements are part of the imagery of *mexicanidad* and *lo mexicano*. However, said representations often fall into stereotypes, misrepresentations, and an easily replicable Disneyfication of Mexican culture. As a general conclusion, Tlaquepaque needs to capitalise more on its unique attributes, such as its centuries-old artisan tradition, promoting its artisans and their clay craft culture, and Tequila needs to revalorise and appreciate its agave-based cuisine.

10.6 The potential of 360-degree video as a promotional tool for cultural tourism

Section 3.2 presented this evolution of VR technology, outlining the highlights in a timeline. What is known as VR today results from different technologies and concepts that followed different evolutionary paths. From early Victorian stereoscopes to the idealisation of VR in science fiction to smartphones with VR capability, 'people have long been captivated by the promise of a portable world' (Sokohl, 2017, p. 6). VR, as a concept, attempts to create an

immersive simulation making the user feel transported to a different environment. Such a virtual environment could be a replica of a real place or a computer-generated one. Section 3.3 presented a debate on whether 360-degree videos should be considered VR. Despite dissenting voices and the fact that 360-degree video does not provide a computer-generated environment, in this thesis, 360-degree video is proposed and assumed as a type of VR because it fulfils the agreed characteristics mentioned in the discussion; when played on HMDs they are visualised with head motion tracking, bring a degree of immersion, and could have interactive elements.

Sections 3.4 and 3.5 discussed the applications of technology in tourism, showing an overview of the research field that integrates both things. In recent years, VR has brought significant potential to the tourism industry, and it became increasingly popular after Facebook acquired the Oculus Company in 2014 (see section 3.2). Since then, other companies such as Samsung, Google, Sony, HTC, and Microsoft have started commercialising affordable VR products to the mass market, moving from the ‘early adoption phase’ of VR to mainstream consumer usage (Yung and Khoo-Lattimore, 2017). Therefore, this technology offers new ways for marketers and PR practitioners to provide information and interact with consumers and stakeholders.

Although most potential visitors generally showed positive reactions towards using 360-degree video for promoting tourism, they said that 360-degree video is not necessarily superior to photographs (see section 8.3). Each format has its merits and utility in different ways and circumstances. An integral approach is proposed for using both formats in different situations complementing each other. Having an integral approach could perhaps result in positive contributions. Photographs and 360-degree video can complement each other and serve different objectives. However, selecting the type of promotional format in a campaign would strongly depend on the targeted audience. The 360-degree video format on VR HMDs could perhaps be more appealing to younger generations. With many divided opinions regarding the type of content participants expected to see, the key would be to provide the user with a personalised experience. The key to promotional strategies in the future should be strongly related to providing personalised 360-degree content to users using AI and algorithms. Likewise, new developments like AR and MR are bringing new possibilities. With a growing number of companies investing in Facebook’s Metaverse, 360-degree video and fully interactive VR could become excellent opportunities for tourism promotion.

10.7 Applicability of Results

This study suggests that there is a positive attitude towards the use of 360-degree video and photographic material to promote the Magical Towns. Although there was a very favourable

position towards 360-degree video, it has been concluded that a strategy that integrates both 360-degree video and photographs would be the best way to go. Therefore, there are different ways in which this study's results can be applied to impact the Magical Towns programme, the tourism industry, and the promotion of Mexico as a diverse destination.

This study's results can be applied in real-life scenarios. The study focused on two of the 132 Magical Towns in Mexico, and while it would be wrong to assume its conclusions can be directly transferred to all other Magical Towns, they certainly provide useful insights into how further research might be conducted. However, many of the towns in the programme try to replicate a so-called 'Mexican atmosphere' using cultural elements endemic to the state of Jalisco (where Tequila and Tlaquepaque are located), such as mariachi music, charro outfits, and tequila cocktails, as well as colourful elements such as *papel picado* and ceramic handicrafts. Such elements are part of the collective idea of an essentialised Mexican identity representing a mestizo nation known as *mexicanidad*, which has also been associated with representing Mexico abroad as they are usually assumed as Mexican. Therefore, the positive response towards representing such elements in promotional 360-degree video and photographic material in Tequila and Tlaquepaque can be helpful for other towns.

There are two real-life scenarios to which this study's results can contribute. On the one hand, the public sector can use 360-degree video to promote the town itself, and every Magical Town can produce its version showcasing public spaces such as parks, museums, plazas, and streets full of Spanish architecture like the example provided in this study. On the other hand, it can be helpful in the private sector to advertise their restaurant, hotel, tour, or attractions, such as the example of Tequila Patron, which gives a tour showcasing the tequila-making process so foreign tourists can see and feel the place when deciding what to buy.

Likewise, the results look at Mexico's country image in the UK. This study can help the Mexican tourism authorities understand British potential visitors' opinions regarding their preferences, expectations, and decision-making process. Since the UK is the third largest market right after the US and Canada, learning more about potential UK visitors is important to create better-targeted content. This study could help them plan and adapt their promotional strategies by tailoring content according to the identity and branding they want to promote to shape the image and reputation that they wish to have. The following section provides a series of recommendations and thoughts about implementing 360-degree video in promoting Mexico's Magical Towns programme.

10.8 Recommendations for using 360-degree video in Magical Towns promotion

It can be concluded that a mixed approach is the best way to go. Integrating photographs and 360-degree video is more beneficial than using them alone, as each format is helpful for different purposes and audiences. A holistic campaign can provide photographs in printed material and social media while incorporating VR experiences in outreach activities or distributing them through QR codes. In any case, 360-degree video on VR experiences is an innovative way to pique interest, and it would be best used to add value to a campaign.

Integrating printed and digital media can complement each other in a bigger strategy. The Covid-19 pandemic made QR codes finally take off in the UK, and they are now widely used by the general public. The NHS Test and Trace service and hospitality industry offering table service via QR codes pushed the public to adopt their use. In this study, participants scanned a QR code to watch a 360-degree video on their phones using a cardboard VR viewer. Nothing is preventing printed media from doing the same. For instance, a travel guide such as Lonely Planet could include a QR code linked to a 360-degree video of the place they give information about. That could be done in partnerships between tourist boards, travel guides, or magazines.

Both formats can be distributed online. If a destination or a tourist board has an up-to-date website and good social media presence, they can upload photographs of the towns and incorporate 360-degree video so that people can watch them on their computers, mobile phones, or VR HMDs. This feature is currently supported on YouTube and Facebook, where participants can watch a 360-degree video by rotating their mobile phone on its axis or using their fingers to swipe around it. That would bring the material to potential visitors on their social media instead of expecting them to actively seek for it.

Another way to implement 360-degree video to promote the Magical Towns is through outreach activities in public places. A campaign with pop-up booths to showcase Mexico could bring VR experiences as part of the activities. It could offer a sample of Mexico by bringing Mexican food, music, dance, and handicrafts, offering VR experiences for people interested in seeing what places, such as the Magical Towns, look like. Depending on the targeted audience, that idea could be implemented in different settings such as student campuses, shopping centres, travel agencies, and hotel lobbies.

A better version of the video could include more energetic footage giving a more sensorial experience with more colour and vibrancy. Food being prepared in front of the camera, sitting at a table, having drinks put down in front of the camera, or standing in a kitchen or a food market could click with specific audiences. Having a narrator or multiple narrators telling a story could click with others. There are endless possibilities, and each Magical Town can create

their version or even several versions to make it more personal and target different types of travellers. However, a VR experience should not give away too much, and it should only trigger interest to learn more and include a call to action to awaken a travel intention. Although this technology can be used for people who are physically unable to travel, in this instance, it should not be used as a substitute for travelling as it could otherwise give no reason to visit the place.

As technology quickly evolves, these recommendations should be taken in the context of the time of writing. It is highly likely that VR technology and the 360-degree video format itself will be replaced by new technological developments in some time. Indeed, the cardboard VR viewers used in this study are already being discontinued, and more accessible and user-friendly technologies with more sophisticated immersive experiences are already becoming available. Practitioners should be able to adapt this study's core principles and findings into whatever format or technological development the future holds.

10.9 Research contribution

This study contributes to three areas: marketing communications and PR, technology, and tourism. In the marketing communications and PR field, it contributes by exploring the communication dynamics between stakeholders in two Magical Towns and their intentions to establish communication with foreign visitors. The study also explores Mexico's country image and reputation among potential visitors and the potential of 360-degree video to change their perceptions. The study provides an overview of potential visitors' preconceptions about Mexico's country image and their expectations in the four categories of the aesthetic dimension developed by Buhmann (2016). It also sheds light on how 360-degree video can change how they think about Mexico after being exposed to a VR experience by analysing it with a Jefkins (1994) transfer process approach. All of that serves to give an idea of how this format can promote Mexico and construct its country image by promoting the Magical Towns as international destinations, looking at Tequila and Tlaquepaque as case studies.

In the technology field, it contributes by looking at the adoption and usability of 360-degree video and its technical aspects. The study provides an example of how a 360-degree video can be produced with a limited budget and consumer equipment accessible to anyone. It presented the experience of filming in one of the Magical Towns, documenting some challenges in the making process. There are concluding ideas and suggestions on improving the script, shots, voice-over, and storytelling to produce a better 360-degree video for the targeted market. The study provides an example of distributing this video format to the general public using QR codes and cardboard VR viewers. Although cardboard VR viewers are now discontinued, this

format can still be used with other VR HMDs. Such contributions could be considered when producing 360-degree video or other new immersive experiences that the future holds in real-life scenarios.

In the tourism field, this study provides a glance at new tools to promote tourism and grow the Mexican tourism industry. The study gives ideas and suggestions on how this tool can improve tourism promotion. It can particularly help the private sector, as 360-degree video can be used to promote hotels and restaurants so potential visitors can have a look before visiting or even considering visiting. The study also gives information about the potential visitors' decision-making process, travel intentions, and needs. It contributes with information about what they would like to find in the Magical Towns, why they would prefer visiting a Magical Town over a beach destination, and the implications and limitations regarding finances and time. This study serves as a window to the lives and opinions of potential visitors and brings ideas, so the private sector can improve its services and strategies and look further into creating strategic alliances. Such alliances could pull tourism from resorts as beach destinations are the ones that receive most of the international tourists and flights from the UK. Pulling tourists from Puerto Vallarta to Tequila and Tlaquepaque, extending their visit to inland Jalisco seems a plausible idea.

10.10 Recommendations for Further Research

This study showed that there is a willingness among potential visitors to use new types of technology, such as 360-degree video, to experience a Mexican Magical Town before deciding to travel there and that it can highly challenge the perception they have of the country. However, many questions remained unanswered, allowing further research on the topic. For that reason, this section suggests a list of future research opportunities.

This study's results are limited to the number of participants, representing the opinion of a small sample of potential visitors. A larger sample is necessary to make more accurate generalisations regarding awareness levels and country image and to better understand their decision-making process. Further studies can focus on a larger sample or include different demographics. For instance, a follow-up study could look at British visitors who have already been to the Magical Towns and are familiar with the programme. Another example could be looking at a sample from a different European country as their awareness levels, media exposure and pre-conceptions about Mexico can differ.

There is a need to explore the promotion of the Magical Towns programme in more detail. Further research should include a larger sample of stakeholders in a larger number of Magical

Towns. In terms of internationalisation, further research can look at specific aspects such as integrating English information in advertising, websites, social media, and tours. A stronger tourism approach can look at the specifics of the towns' infrastructure to cover international visitors' needs. Replicating the study in other Magical Towns could also contribute. Indeed, similar studies could be conducted in other Hispanic countries with similar programmes, such as Colombia, Spain, Peru, and Argentina, exploring similar aims and objectives using 360-degree video as a promotional tool for their targeted markets. That could provide more information to draw comparisons and better understand how to use it in these settings.

This research strongly suggests that although photographic material will remain a more viable way to promote Mexico as a destination, there is a positive attitude towards 360-degree video and VR. Better VR HMDs, such as Oculus, could provide a more accurate measurement by bringing a higher quality experience. Further research could include measuring the impact of outreach activities in real-life scenarios where the 360-video format is provided as a promotional tool instead of the hypothetical scenario presented in this study. Another opportunity could be looking at monoscopic 360-degree video as a more adopted format on social media. Using the model developed by Buhmann (2016), a fully quantitative approach could also contribute to more accurate measurements filling more gaps on a highly unexplored topic. However, with technology changing so quickly, it is very difficult for research to catch up with the next new thing, so exploring other types of technology, such as Augmented Reality (AR) and Mixed Reality (MR), could be an opportunity to do similar research on those technologies and assess their impact on the country's image, reputation and the Magical Towns programme.

10.1.1 Technical considerations for future 360-degree video productions

The 360-degree video was recorded with an Insta360 Pro video camera, an affordable option that was released in 2017. The video quality, however, was not what participants expected. The camera filmed in 8K video mode, but an 8K quality was not achieved. While playing the 360-degree video in monoscopic mode offered a good video quality, it was not the case for the stereoscopic (VR) mode. Splitting the screen in two narrowed the field of view, and participants only saw around a quarter of the total pixels at any given time. Achieving a real 8K quality in VR mode would require presenting a 32K video.

Additionally, there was an expected loss of quality during the editing and rendering process and when uploading to YouTube and playing the video on the participants' devices. They had different smartphones with different capabilities, screen resolutions, sizes and Internet connections that impacted the video quality. Being a technology that evolves very quickly, Google

discontinued the cardboard VR viewers provided soon after the data collection concluded. Better and more professional equipment is available to produce 360-degree video and VR experiences that can guarantee a higher quality, such as Oculus HMDs.

10.12 Summary

This chapter reviewed the key aspects of this study, acknowledging its limitations and answering the research question ‘to what extent can 360-degree video help to promote Mexico’s Magical Towns as international tourist destinations?’. This chapter discussed the applicability of the findings and the research contribution and presented a series of recommendations for implementing 360-degree video and photographic material in promoting the Magical Towns programmes, drawing a series of recommendations for further research in the field. It can be concluded that although 360-degree video is a novel promotional tool that can significantly contribute to constructing Mexico’s country image and reputation by depicting places strongly related to its country identity, the preference for more straightforward promotional material, such as photographs, will prevail. Implementing 360-degree video should then be part of an integral approach and not a stand-alone promotional tool. That is because it requires much effort, knowledge and the appropriate equipment to have a VR experience. Therefore, at the time of writing, it is recommended to implement 360-degree video in ways that users are familiar with, for instance, by distributing the material in monoscopic mode on platforms such as YouTube and Facebook.

One argument could be that until every household owns a VR HMD, and the average user adopts this technology, this could not be considered a mainstream promotional tool. However, it is highly likely that new technological developments will replace VR and 360-degree video itself with more user-friendly and more accessible immersive experiences. The new development of virtual initiatives that are betting on creating a Metaverse, for instance, is bringing new opportunities encouraging the adoption of these technologies and the proliferation and improvement of VR HMDs and tools for creating virtual experiences. Practitioners should be able to adapt this study’s core principles and findings into whatever format or technological development the future holds.

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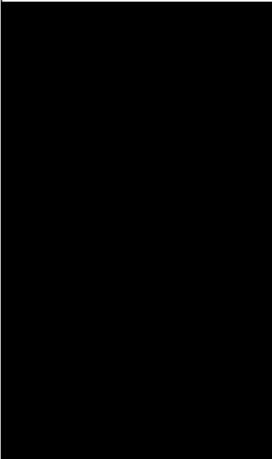
Appendices

Appendix A. Script for the 360-degree video

Title:	Tlaquepaque	Filming date:	21 – 25 October 2019
Author:	Jesús Leopoldo Salazar Flores	Format:	360° Video
Place:	Tlaquepaque, Jalisco, Mexico	Duration:	4'40"

Shot No.	Location	Visual	Audio specifications	Voiceover	Duration
1	NU LOGO ON BLACK BACKGROUND 	 <p><u>Text:</u> FRONT PLEASE WAIT</p>	<u>Track:</u> New Land – YouTube Audio Library OWN EDITION		30"
2	SIGN 		<u>Track:</u> Spanish Rose – YouTube Audio Library OWN EDITION continues...	Welcome to Tlaquepaque, a Magical Town in the outskirts of Guadalajara, Mexico. Before the Spaniards arrived here, this land was part of an indigenous kingdom governed by a woman named Cihuapilli Tzapotzinco. During the Spanish rule, the territory became part of the New Kingdom of Galicia in what was known as New Spain. Today it's the Mexican state of Jalisco. Let's have a look around!	40"

3	INDEPENDENCIA AVENUE 		<p><u>Track:</u></p> <p>...continues</p> <p>Spanish Rose – YouTube Audio Library</p> <p>OWN EDITION</p>	Tlaquepaque is an artisans' community and a colourful sample of authentic Mexico. It's popular among tourists looking for traditional crafts like sculptures, blown glass, woodcarvings, jewellery, and ceramics. This is Independencia Avenue, a pedestrian street with beautiful architecture where you can find art galleries, handicrafts, museums, restaurants, and cafes serving authentic Mexican food.	40"
4	PLAZA (HIDALGO) 		<p><u>Track:</u></p> <p>Hilipot – YouTube Audio Library</p> <p>OWN EDITION</p> <p>continues...</p>	This is Tlaquepaque's central plaza or Hidalgo garden. It was named after Miguel Hidalgo, a national hero that came here during the Mexican war of independence. All the main events take place here, and it's the ideal site for having an ice cream or a coffee with friends. You can also find two churches here: San Pedro and Our Lady of Solitude.	40"
5	BANDSTAND 		<p><u>Track:</u></p> <p>...continues</p> <p>Hilipot – YouTube Audio Library</p> <p>OWN EDITION</p>	Tlaquepaque is great for strolling around town. You can have a slow walk visiting El Refugio Cultural Centre, the Regional Museum of Ceramics, the craftsmen house, the Pantaleón Panduro museum, and the local market. Unlike holiday resorts, this town makes you feel like you are in traditional Mexico. For that reason, in 2018, Tlaquepaque was recognised as a Magical Town, a Pueblo Mágico.	40"

6	EL PARIAN 		<p><u>Track:</u></p> <p>Mariachiando – YouTube Audio Library</p> <p>OWN EDITION</p> <p><u>Track:</u></p> <p>Original footage audio</p>	<p>We are now at El Parián, an unmissable experience. This huge cantina hosts a series of bars around a central bandstand. Here you can enjoy fantastic variety shows of Mariachi music and folk dances while you have traditional dishes and drinks prepared with the national spirit; Tequila. Let's listen a bit of this music considered an Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.</p> <p>Come and visit Tlaquepaque! The perfect complement to your holiday in Mexico.</p>	60"
7	BLACK BACKGROUND 	 <p>CREDITS</p> <p><u>Text:</u></p> <p>Newcastle University School of Arts and Cultures Media – Culture – Heritage Created by Jesús Leopoldo Salazar Flores Supervised by Laurel Hetherington and Peter Stone Royalty free music from the YouTube Audio Library: New Land Spanish Rose Hiitop Mariachiando</p>	<p><u>Track:</u></p> <p>New Land – YouTube Audio Library</p> <p>OWN EDITION</p>		30"

Appendix B. Interviews question protocol

Greeting

Icebreaking short conversation

Explanation of the aim and structure of the interview / You are not obliged to answer all the questions

START RECORDING

Say control number 'magical town X interviewee X'

Repeat consent for the record

I know you have been involved in the local magical towns committee... I would like to start asking you about...

1 Decision of becoming part of the programme and application process

Which were the motivations for becoming a magical town?

2 Benefits of the Magical Towns programme (if any)

Who are being benefitted the most in the programme?

Government ☐ Residents ☐ Local businesses ☐ Other ☐

3 Cultural influence of the town to the country's image

What does represent the town?

What does the town has that can't be found anywhere else?

How does it helps to build up Mexico's country identity/brand/image/reputation?

4 Use of the PM brand and adaptation

Is the use of the brand benefiting the town?

Who uses the brand the most?

Government ☐ Residents ☐ Local businesses ☐ Other ☐

Do they do PM branded souvenirs?

Overall, does the brand help?

No, moving on to look at your specific promotion strategies...

5 Engagement, promotion, and visual strategies

How do they engage with the visitors/local community/businesses?

How do they keep communication with tourists? (Pre and during visit)

What do they already have?

Electronic ☐ Editorial ☐ Events ☐ Publications ☐

Video promotion

360 Video ☐ Regular video ☐ Photographs ☐ None ☐

How do they promote the town? / Which strategies they do?

Adv + VR

Would they like 360?

Community appropriation of the programme (stakeholders)

What is the participation of the community in the committees?

Does people feel proud of it?

Finally, moving towards the future expectations...

6 Challenges in the future

What are the challenges that the town will foresee in the future?

Will the town remain in the programme?

Which is the participation of the council of touristic promotion?

How is going to be the promotion with the new government?

7 Targeted visitors and feedback

Commercially sensitive

Who are the visitors?

British?

Uk visitors? European?

How many?

What do they came for?

Do you advertise mostly for domestic tourists?

Any other points you would like to make?

Thank you very much for your time

This is the end of recording 'magical town X interviewee X'

STOP RECORDING

Thank interviewee again off the record

Give them business card in case they want to ask further details of the project

Appendix C. Instruction sheet included in participant's kit



Participant Number:



Hi, I'm Jesús!

Thank you for your interest in taking part in my study. I am a PhD Candidate at Newcastle University's Media, Culture, and Heritage department. My project looks at the use of 360-degree videos in the promotion of cultural tourism. With your help, I will complete my thesis' data collection and learn more about what people in the UK know and think about my country, Mexico. Please read this leaflet carefully and follow the instructions. If you have any questions, please don't hesitate to contact me!



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 📷 @salazarleopoldo

What is the purpose of the research?

The study addresses the development and potential use of 360-degree videos in the international promotion of Mexico's cultural tourism.

What does taking part involve?

You will be asked to watch a 360-degree video on a VR viewer, answer an online questionnaire, and join a Zoom discussion.

What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?

Due to the study's nature, there are low to no risks of harm or disadvantages in taking part in the study (please see the health and safety section on page 4).

Who can participate?

People that are 18 years or older, have a recent-model smartphone (2016 onwards) and identify themselves as avid travellers that enjoy cultural tourism.

What are the possible benefits of taking part?

You will not get any personal benefit by taking part in this study. However, you are free to keep the VR viewer for your personal use, and if you join the Zoom discussion, you will get the chance to win a multistore £50 voucher. By taking part in this study, you will help me to complete my PhD.

Ethics and data protection

This study received ethical approval from the Newcastle University Ethics Committee on the 16th of April 2018. Your answers will be recorded and analysed as part of a Doctoral Thesis at Newcastle University. They will be stored on a password-protected computer, and they will be destroyed within the next 24 months. You are free to withdraw from the study at any time within the next six months and without giving any reason, in which case, any data that you have provided up to that point will be omitted.

As a participant, you are required to complete an online questionnaire and watch a 360-degree video. You will start by answering the questionnaire on your computer. On a particular page, you will be prompted to take a pause and watch the 360-degree video on the VR viewer. After watching the video, you will continue answering the rest of the questionnaire. At the end of the questionnaire, you can choose to join a follow-up Zoom meeting.



Please enter the following internet address on your computer or tablet and start answering the questionnaire.

<http://bit.ly/qremx>



When you get prompted, please watch the 360-degree video on the VR viewer provided using your phone. (Please see instructions on the next page of this leaflet).



After watching the 360-degree video on the VR viewer, please return to your computer and continue answering the rest of the questionnaire.

zoom

If you decide to join the Zoom conversation, you will be contacted with further information later on.

How to watch the 360-degree video on your VR viewer

1

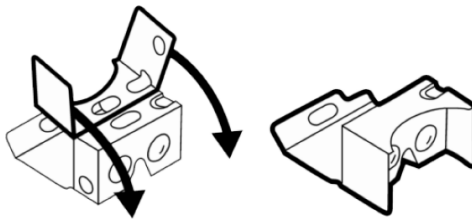


Wi-Fi

Mobile
dataAuto
rotate

Please ensure that you have the latest version of the YouTube app installed on your phone and that it is up to date. Please also ensure that you have a stable internet connection through Wi-Fi or Mobile Data and that the Auto-Rotate function on your phone is activated.

2



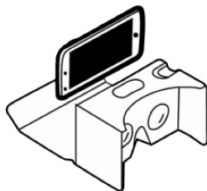
Take your VR viewer and de-attach the top velcro strip that is holding everything together. Fold-out the two flaps, and fold-down the entire bottom section with the two flaps over until the velcro pads on the flaps match up with the velcro pads on the viewer's sides. Fold the flaps down until the velcro pads are secured, and remove any protector film from the lenses.

3



When you reach the appropriate section of the questionnaire, you will be prompted to watch the 360-degree video. Scan the QR code or open the internet address on your phone. That will automatically play the video on your YouTube app. When the video starts playing, select the VR icon on the lower right-hand corner of the screen. The video will play in fullscreen, splitting your phone's screen into two images.

4



Insert your phone sideways into the VR viewer and secure the front flap with the top velcro stripe. Hold the VR viewer against your eyes and watch the video. Adjust your phone, aligning the middle line of the screen with the viewer if necessary. When the video finishes, you can remove your phone from the viewer and continue answering the questionnaire on your computer.

If you can't watch the video on VR mode try the following

I don't know how to scan a QR code

Most modern phones can scan QR codes using the regular photo camera app. All you have to do is open your camera app, point to the QR code provided in the questionnaire, and confirm that you want to open the internet address associated with the code. Alternatively, you can install a QR code reader app.

When I scan the QR code nothing happens

If scanning the QR code from your computer screen doesn't do anything, please tap your phone's screen to autofocus the code. If that doesn't fix the problem, close your camera app, open your phone's internet browser app, and enter the internet address provided in the survey.

When I enter the internet address on my phone's browser nothing happens

If when you enter the internet address on your phone it doesn't open the 360-degree video on the YouTube app, you can leave your phone aside and watch the video on your computer screen before continuing with the questionnaire. You can drag the image in any direction to have a panoramic view.

I'm experiencing double vision or image distortion

Please ensure that your mobile phone is centred in the viewer aligning the middle line of the screen with the viewer. You can try manoeuvring your phone with your index fingers through the sides moving up and down and side to side until you reach a perfect position. If problems persist, try calibrating your phone by installing the Google Cardboard app, where you will be asked to scan the following VR viewer code. Once you've done that, you can reopen the 360-degree video. If you feel dizzy or uncomfortable, stop using the viewer immediately and proceed to watch the video on your computer.



Health and Safety Considerations

Before putting the viewer on, look at your surroundings and remain aware of the presence of any tables, chairs, or other objects around you.

During the 360-degree video, do not attempt to walk with the viewer or interact with the objects in the virtual environment. This video does not contain any interactive elements.

Please note the rubber band should not be used as a head strap. This is only intended to prevent the phone from sliding out of the viewer. Using the rubber band as a head strap may cause harm.

If at any moment you experience discomfort or any symptoms similar to eye strain, disorientation, nausea or motion sickness, please discontinue using the VR viewer immediately.

Similar to the symptoms people may experience after they disembark a cruise ship, VR exposure symptoms can persist and become more apparent after use. If you feel the need to recover after the experience, please do so.

Do not use the VR viewer while driving, walking or operating heavy machinery as this may cause serious harm or prevent you from obeying traffic and safety regulations.

Do not drive or operate heavy machinery immediately after using the VR viewer if you feel impaired or disoriented.

This VR viewer is not for use by children.

Please do not use this viewer if you are prone to seizure activity, have a cardiac pacemaker, hearing aids or other implanted medical devices.

Do not, under any circumstances, leave the viewer in direct sunlight as this may cause fire or property damage due to sunlight focused into a high-temperature area by the viewer lenses.

Appendix D. Online questionnaire



Thank you for your interest in this study! This survey is part of an academic research project, and your answers will be used in a PhD Thesis.

You will be asked what you know and think about Mexico. There are no right or wrong answers as this is not a knowledge test.

Thank you for your time, honesty and help.

By selecting 'Yes' I confirm that:

I understand that the information collected in this survey will be used for research purposes only and that my participation in this study is completely anonymous.

☐ Yes, I voluntarily want to participate in the study.



Participant number (if you weren't given one type 0).

Which of the following options describes you best?

- ☐ I have lived in the UK most of my life.
- ☐ I have lived in another country most of my life but I currently live in the UK.
- ☐ I have never lived in the UK.

If you have lived in another country most of your life, where?

Have you ever been to Mexico?

- ☐ Yes.
- ☐ No.

If yes, where?



Did you receive a participant kit with a VR viewer?

- ☐ Yes.
- ☐ No.



Have you ever had a VR experience or watched a 360-degree video on a viewer/headset?

- ☐ Never.
- ☐ Once.
- ☐ Several times.
- ☐ Often.



Based on your personal experiences and knowledge about Mexico, how would you rate the quality of the country's following attributes?

	Very poor	Poor	Fair	Good	Excellent
Cultural goods	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Culinary	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
History and traditions	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Landscapes and scenery	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>



Please complete the following sentences by sliding the bar to the left or right until the extent that you consider appropriate.

Mexico is...

Inexpensive Expensive

Mexico is...

Everyday Exotic

Mexico is...

Dangerous Safe

Mexico is...

Backward Advanced

Mexico is...

Traditional Modern

Mexico is...

Dull Interesting

Mexico is...

Boring Fun

Which of the following items do you associate with Mexico or think are Mexican? (Please select as many as apply).



☐ None of the above

Which of the following foods do you associate with Mexico or think are Mexican? (Please select as many as apply).



☐ None of the above

Which of the following photographs do you associate with Mexico's history and traditions? (Please select as many as apply).



☐ None of the above

Which of the following photographs do you associate with Mexico or think were taken in Mexico? (Please select as many as apply).



☐ None of the above

Which of the following photographs do you associate with Mexico or think were taken in Mexico? (Please select as many as apply).



☐ None of the above



Which of the sources below helped form your impression of Mexico?

Please rank each of the following items in order of importance, with #1 being the most important and #10 being the least important.



TV / Streaming services



Films



Books



Magazines / Brochures



Formal education and museums



Word of mouth



Internet / Social Media



Radio



Newspapers



Events (music, sports, etc.)

Other sources? (Optional)



Reflecting on your previous answers, why do you think you have that impression of the country?

(e.g. the reasons why you think Mexico is a certain way, personal experiences that formed that impression, examples of films that made you think that way or why you associate certain elements/objects with Mexico).



Have you seen this brand before?



- ☐ Yes.
- ☐ No.
- ☐ I'm not sure.

If yes, where?



Have you seen this brand before?



- ☐ Yes.
- ☐ No.
- ☐ I'm not sure.

If yes, where?



Have you ever heard of Tequila?

- ☐ Yes.
- ☐ No.
- ☐ I'm not sure.

What is Tequila? (Please select as many as apply).

- ☐ A drink.
- ☐ A place.
- ☐ A dish.
- ☐ I don't know.
- ☐ Other (please specify).



Have you ever heard of Tlaquepaque?

- ☐ Yes.
- ☐ No.
- ☐ I'm not sure.

What is Tlaquepaque? (select as many as apply)

- ☐ A drink.
- ☐ A place.
- ☐ A dish.
- ☐ I don't know.
- ☐ Other (please specify).

Please take a few moments to look at the following photographs of the town of Tequila:



When you are ready to continue please click next.



After looking at Tequila's photographs, and if you had the chance to visit Mexico soon, to what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
I would seek information about Tequila	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I would consider visiting Tequila	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I would tell others and share Tequila's photographs	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I would recommend visiting Tequila	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>



Based on your impression of the town of Tequila, please complete the following sentences by sliding the bar to the left or right until the extent that you consider appropriate.

Tequila looks...

Inexpensive Expensive

Tequila looks...

Everyday Exotic

Tequila looks...

Dangerous Safe

Tequila looks...

Backward Advanced

Tequila looks...

Traditional

Modern

Tequila looks...

Dull

Interesting

Tequila looks...

Boring

Fun



Please rate how well the previously shown photographs of Tequila accomplished the following statements.

	Very poor	Poor	Fair	Good	Excellent
Offered a realistic view	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Held my attention	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Was enjoyable	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Amazed me	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Got me interested	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Taught me something	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Changed my views	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Encouraged me to visit	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Reflecting on your previous answers, why did you rate Tequila's photographs that way?



Please watch the following 360-degree video before you continue.

If you were provided with a VR viewer, please follow the instruction sheet that came with it and scan the QR code with your mobile phone.

If you don't have a VR viewer, please watch the video below. You can drag the image in any direction to move around and have a panoramic view. If you can't see the video below, please click [here](#) to open YouTube in a new window.



<https://bit.ly/nclvr>

When you are ready to continue, please click next.

Please use this box to describe any issues you had while using the VR viewer or playing the 360-degree video. (Optional)



After watching the 360-degree video and if you had the chance to visit Mexico soon, to what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
I would seek information about Tlaquepaque	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I would consider visiting Tlaquepaque	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I would tell others and share Tlaquepaque's video	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I would suggest visiting Tlaquepaque	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>



Based on your impression of the town of Tlaquepaque, please complete the following sentences by sliding the bar to the left or right until the extent that you consider appropriate.

Tlaquepaque looks...

Inexpensive

Expensive

Tlaquepaque looks...

Everyday

Exotic

Tlaquepaque looks...

Dangerous

Safe

Tlaquepaque looks...

Backward

Advanced

Tlaquepaque looks...

Traditional Modern

Tlaquepaque looks...

Dull Interesting

Tlaquepaque looks...

Boring Fun



Please rate how well Tlaquepaque's 360-degree video accomplished the following statements.

	Very poor	Poor	Fair	Good	Excellent
Offered a realistic view	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Held my attention	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Was enjoyable	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Amazed me	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Got me interested	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Taught me something	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Changed my views	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Encouraged me to visit	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Reflecting on your previous answers, why did you rate Tlaquepaque's 360-degree video that way?



After looking at the photographs and the 360-degree video, which format do you think better promotes the towns' tourism industry and why?

(e.g. which one was more impactful on you, your thoughts on the advantages and disadvantages of each, or why you feel one is better than the other).



Gender

- ☐ Man (including transgender men)
- ☐ Woman (including transgender women)
- ☐ Prefer to self describe as... (non-binary, gender-fluid, agender, etc.)

- ☐ Prefer not to say

Age group

- ☐ 18-24
- ☐ 25-34
- ☐ 35-44
- ☐ 45-54
- ☐ 55-64
- ☐ 65+

Thank you very much for completing my questionnaire. Would you be willing to discuss your views in more depth, either individually or in a small virtual focus group of six others? This would really help me to get some richer data I can use in my work.

- ☐ No, thank you.
- ☐ Yes, my email address is...




This is the end of the survey. Your time and help are truly appreciated.

For any queries please contact:

Jesús Leopoldo Salazar Flores
j.l.salazar-flores2@newcastle.ac.uk

Please click the 'Done' button.

Appendix E. Participant registration form



Participant Registration

Thank you for your interest in taking part in this study. Please fill the form below to express your interest formally.

You will receive a participant kit delivered to your home address free of charge. The kit includes a cardboard VR viewer and instructions for watching a 360-degree video on your mobile phone. You will also need to complete a survey and join a Zoom meeting.

All the information collected in this form, the survey, and the Zoom meeting will be exclusively used for research purposes. Your participation will remain anonymous.

Who can participate?

- 18 years or older;
- permanently living in the UK (mainland);
- have a recent-model smartphone (2016 onwards); and
- enjoy cultural tourism.

Name *

First Last

Age *

Mobile phone model *

Other model

UK Delivery Address *

Street Address

Address Line 2

City State / Province / Region

Postal / Zip Code Country

Email *

Consent *

☐ I agree to take part in this study, be contacted, and receive a participant kit at the above address.

Contact

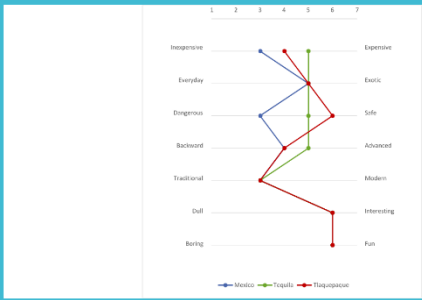
For any queries please contact Jesús Leopoldo Salazar-Flores (j.l.salazar-flores2@newcastle.ac.uk)

Data Protection Statement

The School of Arts and Cultures will use the information provided for delivering participants' kits through the Royal Mail postal service. We will treat this information following the university's data protection policies, and we will retain it until April 2021.

Appendix F. Slides used during the focus groups

<div>1</div> <div>Focus Group</div>	<div>2</div> <div>Group rules!</div> <div><div>→ Participation in the focus group is voluntary. This meeting is being recorded.</div><div>→ Speak as openly as you feel comfortable. It's alright to abstain from discussing specific topics if you are not comfortable.</div><div>→ All responses are valid—there are no right or wrong answers.</div><div>→ Please don't judge. Be polite and respect the opinions of others even if you don't agree.</div><div>→ It's ok to build on the ideas of others but try to stay on topic.</div><div>→ Help protect others' privacy by not discussing details outside the group.</div></div>																				
<div>3</div> <div>Outline</div> <div><div>→ Country Image</div><div>→ Travel intention</div><div>→ Decision-making process</div><div>→ 360° Video</div></div>	<div>4</div> <div>Country Image</div> <div><div>→ What three words come to mind when you think of Mexico? Please write them in the chat box.</div><div>→ How would you describe Mexico to other people?</div></div>																				
<div>5</div> <div>Top three picture association of Mexico's country image aesthetic dimension</div> <div><table><tr><td>Cultural goods</td><td></td><td></td><td></td></tr><tr><td>Culinary</td><td></td><td></td><td></td></tr><tr><td>History and traditions</td><td></td><td></td><td></td></tr><tr><td>Natural landscape and scenery</td><td></td><td></td><td></td></tr><tr><td>Urban landscape and scenery</td><td></td><td></td><td></td></tr></table></div>	Cultural goods				Culinary				History and traditions				Natural landscape and scenery				Urban landscape and scenery				<div>6</div> <div><div><div>Have you ever heard of Tequila?</div><div><div>Yes: 99.13% (Overall score: 1.00%)</div><div><div>No: 0.86%</div></div></div></div><div><div>Have you ever heard of Tlaquepaque?</div><div><div>Yes: 94.91% (Overall score: 1.00%)</div><div><div>No: 5.08%</div></div></div></div><div><div>What is Tequila?</div><div><div>A drink: 99.21%</div><div><div>A dish: 0.78%</div><div><div>A city: 0.00%</div><div><div>I don't know: 0.00%</div><div><div>Other (please specify): 0.00%</div></div></div></div></div></div><div><div>What is Tlaquepaque?</div><div><div>A drink: 0.00%</div><div><div>A dish: 0.00%</div><div><div>A city: 99.21%</div><div><div>I don't know: 0.77%</div><div><div>Other (please specify): 0.00%</div></div></div></div></div></div></div></div></div>
Cultural goods																					
Culinary																					
History and traditions																					
Natural landscape and scenery																					
Urban landscape and scenery																					
<div>7</div> <div></div>	<div>8</div> <div>Travel intention</div> <div><div>→ If you had the resources and opportunity to travel to Mexico, how likely would it be for you to go to places like Tequila and Tlaquepaque?</div></div>																				

<div>9</div> <div>Decision-making process</div> <div>→ Describe the way you decide about a destination. Where do you usually seek information before travelling?</div>	<div>10</div> <div></div>
<div>11</div> <div>360° Video</div> <div>→ What would the ideal implementation of promotional 360° videos be?</div> <div>→ Would you watch a 360° video again? How often?</div> <div>→ How would you describe someone you think would use this VR video to explore a place before visiting?</div>	<div>12</div> <div>→ Which other ways do you think could help to promote cultural tourism?</div>
<div>13</div> <div>Thank you! :)</div>	

Appendix G. Interviews' information sheet and consent form

FRONT / ANVERSO



Information Sheet

What is the purpose of the research?

The study addresses the development and potential use of 360-degree videos in the international promotion of tourist destinations of the *Pueblos Mágicos* Programme researching the towns of Tequila and Tlaquepaque as case studies. This project is partially funded by CONACYT Mexico.

What does taking part involve?

Participating in this study involves taking part in a 45/60 minute interview where you will be asked a series of questions related to the *Pueblos Mágicos* Programme. Your answers will be recorded, transcribed and analysed as part of a Doctoral Thesis at Newcastle University. These will be stored on a password-protected computer and it will be destroyed within the next 24 months.

Why have I been invited to take part?

You have been invited to take part in the study due to the relevance of your work, influence, impact and relation with the *Pueblos Mágicos* programme.

What are the possible benefits of taking part?

You will not get any personal benefit by taking part in this study. However, participating in this research will contribute to explore the use of 360-degree videos in the promotion of towns inscribed in the *Pueblos Mágicos* programme. The results could be taken further applying them in a real-life scenario. This would therefore benefit the programme, the tourism industry, and the town.

What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?

Due to the nature of the study, there are no risks of harm or disadvantages in taking part in the study.

Has this study received ethical approval?

Yes, this study has received ethical approval from Newcastle University Ethics Committee on the 16th of April 2018.

Whom should I contact for further information relating to the research?

Jesús Leopoldo Salazar Flores
PhD Candidate / Candidato a Doctor
Tel: +44 (0) 7397073442
Twitter: @SalazarFloresJ
J.L.Salazar-Flores2@newcastle.ac.uk

Laurel Hetherington
Main Supervisor / Supervisora Principal
laurel.hetherington@newcastle.ac.uk

www.ncl.ac.uk/sacs/mch

Hoja de Información

¿Cuál es el propósito de la investigación?

El estudio aborda el desarrollo y el uso potencial de videos en 360 grados en la promoción internacional de destinos turísticos del Programa Pueblos Mágicos investigando los pueblos de Tequila y Tlaquepaque como estudios de caso. Este proyecto está parcialmente financiado por CONACYT México.

¿En qué consiste participar?

Participar en este estudio implica tomar parte en una entrevista de 45/60 minutos donde se le harán una serie de preguntas relacionadas con el Programa Pueblos Mágicos. Sus respuestas serán grabadas, transcritas y analizadas como parte de una Tesis Doctoral en la Universidad de Newcastle. Estas se almacenarán en una computadora protegida con contraseña y se destruirán en los próximos 24 meses.

¿Por qué me han invitado a participar?

Usted ha sido invitado a participar en el estudio debido a la relevancia de su trabajo, influencia, impacto y relación con el programa Pueblos Mágicos.

¿Cuáles son los posibles beneficios de participar?

No obtendrá ningún beneficio personal al participar en este estudio. Sin embargo, participar en esta investigación contribuirá a explorar el uso de videos de 360 grados en la promoción de pueblos inscritos en el programa Pueblos Mágicos. Los resultados podrían llevarse más lejos aplicándolos en un escenario de la vida real. Por lo tanto, esto beneficiaría al programa, la industria del turismo y el pueblo.

¿Cuáles son las posibles desventajas y riesgos de participar?

Debido a la naturaleza del estudio, no existen riesgos de daños o desventajas al participar en el estudio.

¿Este estudio recibió aprobación ética?

Sí, este estudio recibió la aprobación ética del Comité de Ética de la Universidad de Newcastle el 16 de abril del 2018.

¿A quién debo contactar para obtener más información relacionada con la investigación?

BACK / REVERSO

PARTICIPANT NO. _____ TOWN NO. _____



Consent Form for Semi-Structured Interviews

Forma de Consentimiento para Entrevistas Semiestructuradas

Title of Study: To what extent can 360° Video help to promote Mexico's *Pueblos Mágicos* as international tourist destinations?

Título del Estudio: ¿En qué medida pueden los videos en 360 grados ayudar a promover los Pueblos Mágicos de México como destinos turísticos internacionales?

By signing this form, I agree to voluntarily take part in this research project and I confirm that I have read the information sheet about the study. I confirm that I have had the opportunity to consider the research information and ask questions. I consent to the processing of my personal information (such as name and contact details) for the purposes of this research study and for being re-contacted if needed. I understand that my answers will be looked at by individuals from Newcastle University, where it will be included in a doctoral thesis. I consent to be audio recorded during the interview and I understand that the recordings will be stored on a password-protected computer and it will be destroyed within 24 months after the data has been collected. I understand that I am free to withdraw from the study at any time within the next six months and without giving any reason, in which case, any data that I have provided up to that point will be omitted.

Al firmar esta forma, acepto participar voluntariamente en este proyecto de investigación y confirmo que he leído la hoja de información sobre el estudio. Confirmando que he tenido la oportunidad de considerar la información de la investigación y hacer preguntas. Doy mi consentimiento para el procesamiento de mi información personal (como nombre y datos de contacto) para los fines de este estudio de investigación y para ser contactado(a) de nuevo de ser necesario. Entiendo que mis respuestas serán vistas por personal de la Universidad de Newcastle, donde se incluirán en una tesis doctoral. Doy mi consentimiento para que se grabe audio durante la entrevista y entiendo que las grabaciones se almacenarán en una computadora protegida con contraseña y se eliminarán dentro de los 24 meses posteriores a la recopilación de los datos. Entiendo que soy libre de retirarme del estudio en cualquier momento dentro de los próximos seis meses sin dar ninguna explicación, en tal caso, se omitirá toda información que haya proporcionado hasta ese momento.

- ☐ I would like to remain anonymous
Me gustaría permanecer anónimo

Participant / Participante

Name of participant / Nombre del participante

Signature / Firma

Date / Fecha

Researcher / Investigador

Name of researcher / Nombre del Investigador

Signature / Firma

Date / Fecha

Appendix H. List of stakeholders interviewed

Code	Name	Town	Sector	Interview
Teq1	Francisco	Tequila	Restaurants	In person
Teq2	Juan	Tequila	Tour operators/guides	In person
Teq3	Anonymous	Tequila	Public sector	In person
Teq4	Karenina	Tequila	Public sector	In person
Teq5	Lorenzo	Tequila	Restaurants	In person
Teq6	Anonymous	Tequila	Tour operators/guides	In person
Teq7	Sonia	Tequila	Restaurants	E-mail
Teq8	Anonymous	Tequila	Tour operators/guides	E-mail
Teq9	Diego	Tequila	Tour operators/guides	Video call
Teq10	Bernardo	Tequila	Tour operators/guides	Video call
Tla1	Ana	Tlaquepaque	Public sector	E-mail
Tla2	Lourdes	Tlaquepaque	Merchants	Video call
Tla3	Anonymous	Tlaquepaque	Restaurants	Video call
Tla4	Vicente	Tlaquepaque	Public sector	Video call
Tla5	Anabel	Tlaquepaque	Hotels	Video call
Tla6	Lino	Tlaquepaque	Tour operators/guides	Video call
Tla7	Stanley	Tlaquepaque	Hotels	Video call
Tla8	Valeria	Tlaquepaque	Tour operators/guides	Video call
Tla9	Rodolfo	Tlaquepaque	Hotels	Video call
Tla10	Anonymous	Tlaquepaque	Tour operators/guides	E-mail