

Chapter 51

Analysis of Digital Communication Strategies in Community Tourism: Case Study San Pedro of Vilcabamba



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Abstract Community-based tourism is a critical part of a growing city's economy. With the arrival of COVID-19, tourism activity declined considerably, resulting in a loss of US\$1.281 billion in tourism GDP. For this reason, this sector is seeking to reactivate itself by adopting the biosecurity measures recommended by the National Risk and Emergency Management Service. Given that digital communication and tourism are closely linked to project implementation, the general objective arises to analyze communication strategies in the community tourism sector of the San Pedro of Vilcabamba parish, Ecuador. A vision of the current state of community tourism in the parish was obtained, and the digital communication strategies used to promote the entrepreneurship route, an initiative that arose with the pandemic, were analyzed. It was determined that the parish uses digital communication strategies, although they are unaware of their application, triggering a lack of preparation in digital communication, mainly due to the lack of personnel in this area.

51.1 Introduction

Ecuador is a country with great natural and cultural wealth thanks to its diversity of flora and fauna, in which tourism benefits all productive sectors of the country, improving the quality of life of its inhabitants, considered a pioneer of community-based tourism [1]. The authors Mullo and Padilla [2] point out that since the 1980s, community-based tourism has become the main source of income for many communities, being cataloged as a strategic field in the social, economic and cultural

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development of the community that lives up to the highest expectations in today's world.

Community-based tourism can be defined as a socioeconomic activity with the active participation of the community itself, in which there is an equitable distribution of rights and obligations [3]. According to Rodas, Ullauri Donoso and Sanmartín [4], it originates from the community's decision to try to show the daily life, culture, worldview, authenticity of the community, characteristics that are unique and sometimes indifferent to this globalized world.

Community tourism is a development strategy due to its importance within the economic balance; it is considered as a Priority Policy of the State forming part of the National Development Plan 2017–2021 in which a conscious, sustainable and respectful tourism with the environment and its social communities is promoted; so the Ministry of Tourism (MINTUR) developed the Strategic Plan for Sustainable Development of Ecuador 2020 in which there is a deficiency for the authors Altamirano et al. [1], due to the lack of strategic planning concerning the area of marketing at national and international level.

In such a way, MINTUR is working together with the Decentralized Autonomous Governments (GADs) to cope and seek solutions focusing on digital communication strategies in order to achieve the objectives set to overcome the health crisis that gave a big blow to the tourism sector.

Currently, we are facing a worldwide pandemic called SARS-CoV-2 or coronavirus, where Ecuador adopted a state of sanitary emergency from March until September 2021, which left uncertainty and fear in the population. This virus has generated considerable human and economic losses in the different vital axes of the country, causing many people to close their businesses, causing unemployment and causing a considerable decrease in tourism activity in this sector [5].

In the city of Loja, the GAD Parroquial Rural San Pedro of Vilcabamba is adapting to this new normality with the measures established by the government, applying digital communication strategies to meet the established goals. Since a strategy is a crucial aspect in decision-making for the good management of an organization and the optimization of resources, as pointed out by the author Briones [6].

Digital communication strategies can be employed according to the needs of the times, social realities, markets and companies, offering a long-term sustainability advantage and a proposal for economic and social profitability [7, 8].

The research allows knowing the current reality of community tourism after the state of exception produced by the health crisis caused by COVID-19, on the other hand, regarding the digital communication strategies used by the GAD Parroquial Rural San Pedro of Vilcabamba in order to collect and analyze the same, since there is little information on community tourism.

51.2 Materials and Methods

For this study, we chose the parish San Pedro of Vilcabamba, which after the post-confinement has reactivated community tourism with the route of entrepreneurship, an alternative for tourists to get to know the cultural and touristic richness of the place.

In the first phase, a quantitative analysis was carried out through interviews that allowed us to know the reality of community tourism in the parish San Pedro of Vilcabamba.

An interview with Jhimmy Toledo, president of parish council the San Pedro of Vilcabamba, revealed how the sector is handling the current health crisis in the area of tourism. Later, we interviewed Danilo Espinoza, tour guide of the parish, to learn how they are reactivating tourism in the area. Sybel Ontaneda, professor of Social Communication at the National University of Loja, was also interviewed about the digital communication strategies to be used in tourism due to the COVID-19 pandemic. On the other hand, we proceeded with interviews to entrepreneurs to have a vision of the path of entrepreneurship, how they have faced the pandemic and the promotion of their products. Finally, Wilson Alcoser, a community tourist, was interviewed to learn his preferences and opinion about this type of tourism.

In the second phase, 163 tourists from San Pedro of Vilcabamba were surveyed to learn about their preferences and the promotion of the parish's tourist attractions and enterprises. Since there is no census of the flow of tourists visiting the area because their stay is sporadic, the surveys were applied to the largest number of tourists per enterprise.

In the third phase, a focus group was implemented with the participation of three businessmen, a public relations person, a social communicator from Conagopare-Loja and the local guide. The objective of this tool was to learn how tourism activity is generated by the entrepreneurship route and the digital communication strategies they implement to generate community tourism in the parish.

51.3 Data Analysis

51.3.1 *Analysis of Interviews*

According to the interview with President Jhimmy Toledo, despite the difficulties and challenges caused by the pandemic, the parish has been beneficial in consolidating itself as a tourist destination, creating businesses and carrying out activities permitted by the Cantonal and National COE with the objective of reactivating the economy. Therefore, they are working to support entrepreneurs by improving roads, managing the implementation of a tourism office, providing recyclable materials to enterprises and incorporating prevention and environmental care signage to provide good service to tourists.

On the other hand, Danilo Espinoza, tour guide explains that a way to publicize the qualities that this place has such as water, climate and sunsets was created the native club; this initiative generates employment for young people of the parish; also in these free tours, they seek to publicize the products generated by the parish to promote them together with the parish gad through social networks to generate greater diffusion to increase the visits of visitors.

Sybel Ontaneda, professor of Social Communication at the National University of Loja, explains that social networks are part of the digital communication strategies that aim to strategically organize a communication plan for the implementation of projects within the established deadlines. For the implementation of digital communication strategies, a previous diagnosis is necessary to determine the target audience, the tactics to be used and to determine specific objectives that can be expanded locally and internationally with the implementation of new technologies.

Another particularity of parish governments is the lack of personnel in the area of communication because it is not considered relevant, which is linked to the development of unprofessional communication products, affecting the institutional image, which should be focused on promoting, socializing and informing the community.

The Long-lived Bee and the Heaven's Gate Swing are part of the route of entrepreneurship, an initiative that seeks to revive the economy of the parish, which is disseminated in traditional and digital media. Entrepreneurs use social networks and word-of-mouth marketing to promote their ventures.

Wilson Alcoser, a community tourist who shares his adventures through his social networks about his travels, says that community tourism makes history, culture and traditions visible. With the current health crisis, travel was a restricted activity that is being reopened with biosecurity measures recommended by the National COE to protect the integrity of visitors and residents of the site, where it is desirable that the site has disinfection points. One option to reactivate tourism is to cooperate with tour operators and parish councils because they would help increase the number of tourists and create a tourism concept that differentiates it from the rest.

51.3.2 Survey Analysis

The survey determined the most visited attractions and businesses with respect to their degree of promotion.

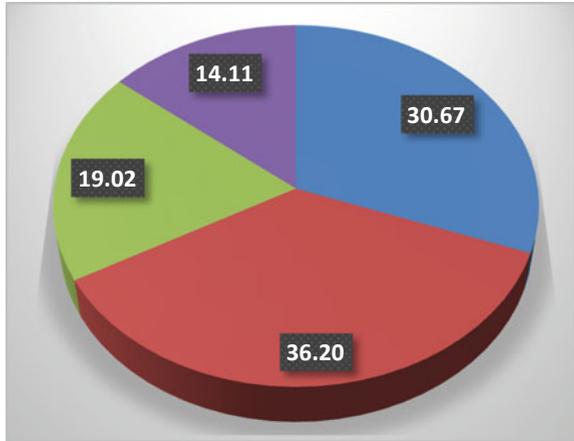
1. How often do you visit the parish San Pedro of Vilcabamba?

According to those surveyed, 36% of the respondents showed a higher flow of tourists occasionally, 31% visited the parish frequently, while 19% visited the parish sometimes and 14% recently visited the place (Fig. 51.1).

2. What strikes you about the parish?

More than half of the respondents were attracted by the tourist attractions, 15% visited the area for its gastronomy, 13% for its tourist attractions and gastronomy,

Fig. 51.1 Percentage of visitors in San Pedro of Vilcabamba (Authorship)



9% for its tourist attractions, gastronomy and enterprises, 8% for its enterprises, 4% for its tourist attractions and enterprises as one of the main reasons for visiting the area and 1% for its gastronomy and enterprises. The conclusion is that more emphasis should be placed on the sector’s tourist attractions (Fig. 51.2).

3. Which tourist attractions have you visited?

The most visited tourist attractions are 30% Mud house, 29% have visited two or more attractions, 27% have visited the Colonial Church located in the Central Park of the parish, followed by 6% Lagoons, 4% Heaven’s Gate Swing which has been very well received by visitors. Also in a lower range, 2% Stone Big and 1% the “Joyapa jumping” canyon where the riches of the place are exhibited (Fig. 51.3).

Fig. 51.2 Tourist preferences (Authorship)

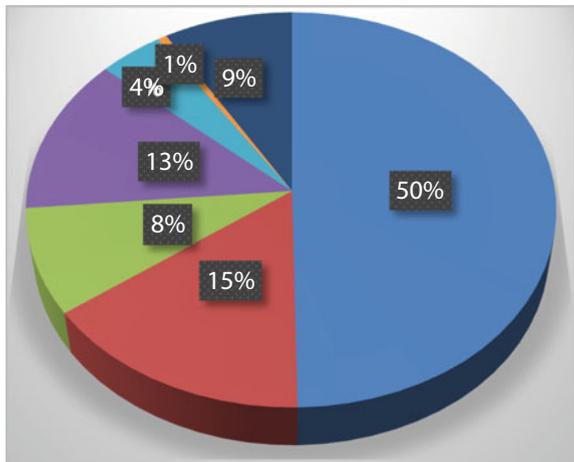
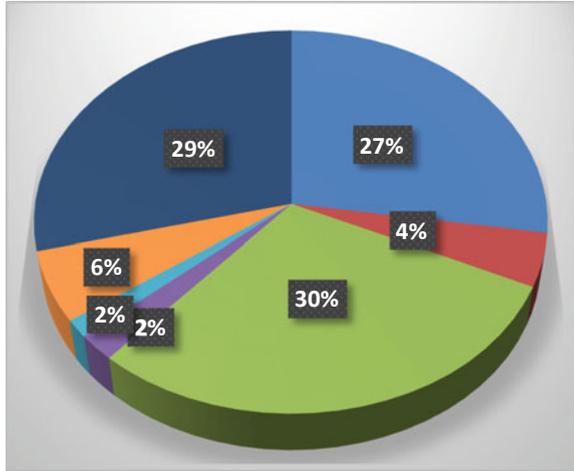


Fig. 51.3 Most visited tourist attractions (Authorship)



4. How did you find out about the tourist attractions of the parish?

It is evident with 77% that people through social networks know more about the attractions of the parish than through traditional media, where 17% learn about it through advertising; 2% press; 2% television and 2% through radio (Fig. 51.4).

5. What ventures do you know of?

It is recorded that the most visited enterprises by tourists are with 32% Deer Sun Brewery, 19% Trout of Salado Restaurant, 5% Beekeepers Association, 5% Millennial Coffee, 11% just like at home and 27% have visited two or more enterprises (Fig. 51.5).

Fig. 51.4 Dissemination of the parish's tourist attractions (Authorship)

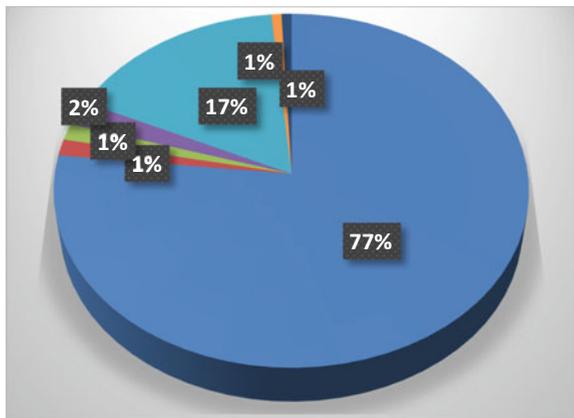
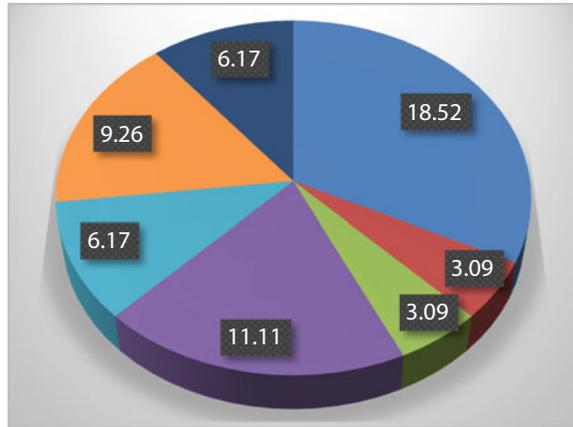


Fig. 51.5 Enterprises in San Pedro of Vilcabamba (Authorship)



51.3.3 General Analysis

The survey of 163 tourists revealed an age range of 10–71 years old, predominantly female gender where tourists occasionally visit the parish focusing on tourist attractions such as the Colonial Church and the Heaven’s Gate Swing that have been advertised through social networks. They are also interested in gastronomy, so the most popular ventures are the Deer Sun Brewery and the Trout of Salado Restaurant, which use social networks as a strategy to advertise and attract tourists.

Regarding the parish government’s advertising, most people do not know it and those who know it qualify it as good; however, there is evidence of a large gap with the target audience, so new advertising strategies should be proposed to help keep the public and reach more tourists, helping tourism in the town, businesses, generate work and improvements in San Pedro of Vilcabamba.

51.3.4 Focus Group Analysis

The focus group showed how social networks and word-of-mouth marketing are the means of promotion most used by entrepreneurs, where it is essential to focus on what they want to communicate, whether it is to position themselves, make themselves known or close sales. It is important to emphasize that each entrepreneur has different communication needs, so it is important to frame the target and the objective of advertising.

On the other hand, it is essential to promote not only the enterprises but also the parish, where collective help will be the key to success. According to the participants, the union between each entrepreneur should be improved because the coordination with the route of the enterprise depends on them, which gave as an option the categorization to adapt to the needs and requirements of the tourists.

The support from the Municipality of Loja is not enough for the entrepreneurs because they do not provide solutions to their requirements such as the issue of roads, a fundamental axis in the sector because tourists have difficulties to move to the tourist attractions which affects the parish. As for Conagopare-Loja, the help with its diffusion and management is low. The parish government should manage the undertakings to create a standard in order to provide a quality service to tourists, where it is important to coordinate tour guides and entrepreneurs for training or meetings and the implementation of a tourism office.

Likewise, they agree that agreements with international entities should be promoted, referring to the signing of an inter-institutional agreement with the Gad of Santa Elena whose purpose was to promote the potential in tourism, gastronomy and entrepreneurship.

51.4 Conclusions

The Parish Government San Pedro of Vilcabamba needed to implement certain measures to promote tourism in the parish due to the confinement caused by COVID-19 in which the enterprises were a great ally for the economic reactivation of the sector, leading to the creation of the route of entrepreneurship, a concept that integrates producers to expose their ideas, products and market to visitors.

Similarly, the promotion of the route of entrepreneurship is key to strengthening the enterprises and tourist attractions of the parish; therefore, the GAD Parroquial San Pedro of Vilcabamba and entrepreneurs use traditional and current digital communication strategies, although they are unaware of their application, among them are: Public relations are immersed in the management and linkage with the associative entity Conagopare-Loja and the Municipality of Loja for the support of communication products. Marketing communication is used to disseminate information about the parish through traditional media. As for advertising and promotion, entrepreneurs use it to publicize their products and offer free tours to visitors to show them how they are made and sold.

At the same time, the campaigns help to publicize San Pedro of Vilcabamba entrepreneurship route. Similarly, the parish implements current digital communication strategies that are booming; among them, we find online advertising for the creation of communication products such as: advertising spots, documentaries and videos about the parish. In digital promotion, entrepreneurs opt for innovative ways to publicize their product, as is the case of Deer Sun, which created an online store to expand its potential customers. Likewise, in terms of 360° communication, they have a corporate website where they show the activities carried out in the parish and one of the most used are social networks for entrepreneurs and the Gad San Pedro of Vilcabamba to promote themselves due to the reach and immediacy they have.

Of the digital communication strategies collected in the research, the entrepreneurs highlighted word-of-mouth marketing and social networks as key strategies for the

promotion of the enterprises due to the interaction that allows feedback on the tastes and preferences of the target audience.

On the other hand, San Pedro of Vilcabamba should also promote itself as a safe parish that has all the biosecurity measures issued by the National COE, which helps to generate confidence in tourists. In addition, it is necessary to have a presence on digital platforms that, with the inter-institutional help of the Municipality and Conagopare-Loja, provide quality communication products required by new technologies.

It is important to highlight the inter-institutional agreements with other parish boards help to make San Pedro of Vilcabamba visible by showing the potential offered by the entrepreneurship route, for which the roads must be in good condition because they reduce the influx of tourists. At the same time, the incorporation of the tourism office would strengthen tourism in the parish San Pedro of Vilcabamba because they do not have the necessary information about the tourist attractions, nor the enterprises that tourists require for a good experience during their visit.

As for internal communication, they have disagreements due to the lack of organization among the entrepreneurs causing disunity in relation to the route of the enterprise, so it is essential to promote assertive communication among them for the advancement and welfare of the inhabitants of the parish.

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