

Brand identity as a tourist attraction from the perception of tourism graduates¹

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ABSTRACT

The tourist activity presents high values in the country, especially in the high season months, the city of Natal/Rio Grande do Norte (RN) and the beach of Ponta Negra/RN present good positions in the tourism rankings. The study begins by bringing contributions on brand, tourism and image and aims to analyze the brand value of Ponta Negra/RN as a tourist attraction from the perception of tourism graduates, based on the assumption that the beach has been losing its value according to the perception of professionals. For methodological purposes, the research is characterized by a qualitative, exploratory and descriptive approach, having as its target audience professionals with a bachelor degree in Tourism who work, live or have visited Ponta Negra/RN. As results some reflections emerged throughout the research, such as the questioning about tourism professionals not mentioning local attractions as alternatives to Ponta Negra/RN. It was noticed that the beach keeps its value, but it needs tools so that this good positioning is maintained in the future and does not confirm the hypothesis that Ponta Negra/RN is seen as an attractive place and with tourist value, but that factors such as infrastructure, insecurity, among other points, are influencing the fall of its position among the attractions of the city and in the way it is perceived by the tourism graduates. It was possible to observe that the image of Natal/RN and the Ponta Negra beach/RN continue well positioned among the tourism graduates and among the tourists, given the results of the questionnaire combined with the results in the official documents, concluding that the beach has not been losing its value, but some factors may influence

¹ The abstract of the paper was published in the annals of the event of the National Association for Research and Post-Graduation in Tourism (ANPTUR), Brazil, 2020.

the fall of its image in the future. Thus, the study can be expanded to other professionals, such as tourism guides, through a qualitative research, in order to approach the theme with more detail on the subject and the results.

Keywords: tourism graduates, brand identity, image, perception, Rio Grande do Norte.

INTRODUCTION

Tourism has been growing as a practice of significant importance in the national and international context. When one thinks of traveling, of getting to know new places, an expectation is created about the destination which the tourist hopes to reach. This expectation is aroused by the image that the city transmits, regardless of whether the place has a strong brand identity or not.

Despite tourism being defined by authors since mid-1911 (Barretto, 1995), the tourism phenomenon began to be studied recently, from the 1970s, which was when the higher education courses began to appear in Brazil. This recent emergence indicates that there is still much to be researched, since the study of tourism encompasses several areas that can be explored by researchers, such as tourism planning, leisure, marketing, quality management, among others.

The tourist activity presents high numbers in Brazil, according to the Tourism Statistical Yearbook of the Ministry of Tourism (2019), in 2018 6,588,770 international tourists arrived in Brazil, against 6,621,376 in 2017 by all access routes (air, land, sea and river). Of these tourists, 26,598 arrived in Rio Grande do Norte (RN) in 2017, compared to 28,672 in 2018. In addition, the Ministry of Tourism recently disclosed by the Survey of Business Survey of Travel Agencies and Organization that Natal is the second most sought-after destination for the months of December and January 2019, losing only to Fortaleza, in Ceará. Domestic arrivals also increased compared to 2017, which had 92,143,864 arrivals compared to 95,518,021, both results include both scheduled and non-scheduled arrivals.



The main problem of this article is related to the growing amount of news and reports about the falling quality of Ponta Negra/RN for tourism. It is necessary that those responsible for tourism management in the city are aware of how they are handling the information disseminated and how the local brand identity is perceived by the professionals of the sector, which were selected touristologists for the development of the research, because a tourist flow can be reduced if there is a mismanagement of the attributes of the destination, mainly, when it comes to the values transmitted by marketing.

The research is based on the hypothesis that Ponta Negra/RN is seen as an attractive place and with tourist value, but that factors such as infrastructure, insecurity, among other points, are influencing the fall of its position among the attractions of the city and in the way it is perceived by touristologists. The research problem consists of: How is the beach of Ponta Negra/RN perceived in terms of value and brand identity among touristologists?

The choice of the research theme occurred through several discussions about the image of Natal and its attractions and how they have been disclosed to tourists, who create an image about the city, but when they arrive there they find a series of structural problems. Moreover, as mentioned in the Marketing Project of Tourism Destinations of the Ministry of Tourism (2015) with the ease in finding information on the internet, tourists will seek information about the destination they want to visit or will go in the future, and negative information about the place can significantly influence the decline in tourist flow, however, positive information about a nearby destination can make the tourist flow migrate to this place.

The present work can contribute to the increase of studies on the importance of improving the brand management of a product, be it tangible or intangible, and on the appreciation of the presence of the tourismologist when it comes to tourism promotion.



A survey of articles on brand value in tourism and on the perception of the tourist that were published in the main scientific journals in Rio Grande do Norte from the year 2014 was carried out. For the research were used the words, brand; brand value; touristologist; marketing; tourism brand and tourism marketing; these words were searched on the websites of scientific journals in RN, such as Quipus of the Universidade Potiguar - UnP; Journal of Contemporary Tourism of UFRN; Holos of the Federal Institute of Rio Grande do Norte - IFRN; Tourism: Studies and Practices of the State University of Rio Grande do Norte - UERN; Carpe Diem: Cultural and Scientific Journal of UNIFACEX however only three articles published in journals of the Federal University of Rio Grande do Norte and UnP were found, as can be seen in table 1 below.

Table 1. Survey of articles published in scientific journals in RN

Journal	Local	Title	Authous	Year
Revista de Turismo Contemporâneo	UFRN (Natal)	Social responsibility, brand identity and environmental labels: A comparative study of Brazilian and Dutch hospitality service companies	Maria de Lourdes de Azevedo Barbosa (UFPE), Bárbara Cinezia Valdez Cavalcante Zaidan (UFPE), Monik Rodd (UFPE), Mariana Bueno de Andrade (UFPE)	2017
Revista de Turismo Contemporâneo	UFRN (Natal)	The importance of stakeholders for brand equity and brand value: a travel agency/operator case study	Livia Kubo (ECA-USP), Benny Kramer Costa (USP), Marcos Vinicius Cardoso (UNINOVE), Thiago de Luca Sant'ana Ribeiro (UNINOVE)	2017
Quipus	UNP (Natal)	Analysis of the image of the tourist destination Natal/RN as perceived by SETURDE in the biennium 2013-2014	Marcos Jose de Souza Cipriano (UFRN), Josenildo Soares Bezerra (UFRN), Sidcley D'sordi Alves Alegrini da Silva (UFRN)	2015

Source: Own elaboration based on the data obtained in the study.

Due to this scarcity of publications on the subject in the state journals, the study may contribute to the valorization of the profession, since the touristologist is a professional with several attributions, given the law N° 12.591, of January 18, 2012 that lists the activities of the tourist, such as planning,



organizing and managing companies in the tourism sector; diagnosing potentialities and deficiencies of a place; creating tourism products, elaborating tourism marketing projects; teaching; among other activities (Brazil, 2012). In other words, the touristologist with the proper qualification has the potential to develop brands in tourism.

This study has as its main objective: to analyze the identity of the Ponta Negra brand as a tourist attraction, from the perception of the touristologists who live, work or have visited the place, since they are also responsible for disseminating the image of the city and its attractions. As specific objectives, we have: a) analyze the positioning of the city of Natal/RN in the northeastern tourism from official data and from the perception of the touristologists; b) describe and evaluate the current situation of the image of Ponta Negra/RN as a tourist destination from the perception of the touristologists and c) outline the profile of the touristologists and analyze their perceptions of the image of the attraction Ponta Negra/RN.

In the sequence the theoretical basis is approached, containing the studies about the tourism profession and its presence in the academy, identity and brand evaluation, the current situation of the positioning of Natal and Ponta Negra in relation to other Northeastern capitals, the methodological procedures used in the work, as well as the research results, conclusion, and bibliographic references used.

TOURISM: EDUCATION AND PROFESSION

The approaches on tourism are varied and constantly modified, since it is a recent activity and the concepts are being updated according to changes in the market and demand. The first definition of tourism activity is given by the Austrian economist, Schattenhofen (1911, apud Barretto, 1995, p. 9) who says that tourism covers all processes, including economic ones, which manifest themselves in the entry, stay, and exit of tourists in a given place.



A more recent definition is given by De La Torre (1992 apud Barretto, 1995, p.13), who wrote that tourism can be understood as a social phenomenon that promotes the temporary and voluntary displacement of people for leisure reasons, leaving their place of residence to another where they have no work ties.

Tourism is an area that began to be studied recently in Brazil. According to Ansarah and Rejowski (1994), the undergraduate courses began to appear from the 1970s in São Paulo and the graduate courses (stricto sensu and lato sensu) appeared from the 1990s. According to Teixeira (2001), tourism courses started to be created because there was an increase in demand, which can be explained in several ways, such as the perception of the market potential; tourist potentialities of the region, where there is a need for qualified labor; besides the fact that there is a lack of qualified teachers; growth of the hotel network, request from entrepreneurs, among others.

The tourism professional is responsible for promoting the best experience of that tourist in the place visited, because the perception of a trip having been positive or not can be directly influenced by the care and responsibility that the tourist will have with the experience of that tourist, being able to quickly solve their problems or proposing alternatives, therefore, according to the WTO (2015), education and training will contribute to the professional in tourism to provide a hospitable reception for tourists, in addition, both salaried and self-employed workers have the right to receive a continuous and appropriate training and education.

Although the tourist is a professional able to work in many different areas and situations and is an important professional for the tourism sector, the recognition of the profession happened only in 2012, by law No. 12.591, January 18, 2012, after much lobbying by professionals. And even though the profession is recognized, it is still not regulated and people with training in the administrative area, such as accounting and administration can exercise the



function of management in tourism, making the touristologists are less recognized in the labor market.

TOURISM AND BRAND IDENTITY

The concept of brands has been presented from several points of view, the most used in marketing is the one that covers the ideas of identification and differentiation of products and services or even between companies, since it is through the brand that consumers will identify with the product and/or the company and if it can convey its mission and values through the product consumed.

The first records about brands occur in ancient history, where there were already products with determined names to differentiate them from others. Such practice was perfected in medieval Europe, with brands being used to have a protection and security for the consumer (Aaker, 1998 apud Neto, 2017).

For Aaker (1998, p. 7), "a brand is a distinctive name and/or symbol (such as a logo, trademark, or packaging design) intended to identify the goods or services of a seller or a group of sellers and to differentiate those goods and services from those of competitors." Shimp (2009) explains that a brand is everything that a company's offering represents when compared to a competing brand in the same product category. This brand will represent everything that the professionals behind its development, including the directors of the company adopt and convey over a given time frame.

Wheeler (2008) understands that the brand has the responsibility to deliver what it promises to the consumer, making sure that the expectations generated by the company in the customer are met, whether the product is tangible or not. With this, Perez (2004) points out that the brand represents a connection that can be symbolic and affective, that is, the organization



through a brand can arouse feelings in consumers and create a link through not only the brand, but its product offered.

Other definitions approach it in more subjective ways like Costa (2011) who states brands as complex systems, endowed with interdependent elements, that need to be managed and coordinated efficiently, in a management that must combine and control the real and symbolic elements of the brand, as well as its media and means that serve to spread its discourse.

The brand building process involves not only the creation of a graphic brand and visual symbols, it is also linked to the determination of strategies, to the brand purpose, to its positioning and its main attributes. With that, Semprini (2006) states that identity is responsible for defining and promoting the mission, specificity and promises of the brand, since it has a significant importance in positioning the company and the product, it is where the customer will establish the connection with the company and with what it promotes in its speech. This thought is reinforced by the amount of definitions of the most diverse authors and it can be observed how the brand needs to be treated with due care so that there is a good positioning of the product or service and to avoid communication errors that compromise its image in the market.

As mentioned by Babić-Hodović (2014), the growth of the role and importance of branding in tourism are reflections of the positive influence of stronger brands that have a valued image in building trust and bonding with tourists during the process of buying a service, moreover, a destination with a brand that conveys positive aspects and have a strong market presence can influence tourists during their visit to the destination.

Tran and Rudolf (2022) categorized the 114 studies reviewed on the topic of destination branding in tourism into five key themes, these being: (1) destination branding strategy, (2) user-generated content, (3) cognitive dimensions, (4) affective dimensions, and (5) behavioral dimensions. In the results pointed out by Baloch et al. (2022) it is possible to identify the strong



relationship between destination branding, destination marketing and destination image, finding evident that the strategic management and marketing approach is essential for the success of the tourism destination.

Through brands, strategies are developed that add value to the product or service, generating the so-called brand value, in which the value of a given product depends on how consumers relate to the brand (Fernandes Silva, Cavalcante Dias, Fernandes Ferreira & Marques Júnior, 2017), which will be better analyzed in the next topic.

IMAGE AND BRAND VALUE

Just as the image is the reflected result of the construction of the brand identity, according to Gaio and Gouveia (2007) while the identity shows itself as a sender concept, which refers to a phenomenon between the political dimension, the territorial tangibles and the results of social interactions, the image is a receiver concept, The process of the elaboration of the image of a place uses a set of signs and/or experiences that may not influence the vision of who will receive the information but that together become essential for the construction of a value judgment.

As Veríssimo et al. (2017) cite, some factors are important and contribute to the development of the brand of a destination, among them, the perceived quality; loyalty and mainly the image, this influences the choice of the destination, besides contributing to the return of the tourist.

The image is a set of perceptions, associations and value judgments of stakeholders, which can be, according to Kotler et al. (1993), positive and attractive, negative, weak (as a result of low brand awareness), or contradictory (when some audiences perceive the city negatively and others positively depending on their demographic and psychographic characteristics, including behavioral and customs).

According to Kotler and Gertner (2002, apud Azambuja, 2015), it is perceived that people form an image of a place just by mentioning its name,



even without the incentive to have a strong brand, i.e., tourists can imagine tourist destinations in a natural way, even without the presence of a strong brand. Linked to the image there is also the brand value, which according to marketing professionals, can be defined according to the perspectives of the consumer and the institution, as defined by Keller and Machado (2006), where the equity of a brand or brand equity represents the tools used for the positioning, communication and sale of the brand, so that it delivers value to customers and provides financial return to companies.

For Aaker (1996), brand equity is a set of features and deficiencies inherent to a brand that add or subtract value to a product. So, "from the customer's point of view, brand equity is part of the attraction - or repulsion - to a product from a particular company [...]. Brand value and brand equity are derived from consumers' words and actions" (Keller & Lehmann, 2006, p.14). In the case of classic brands, products or services, the immaterial and material values of the brand are considered separately during the process of defining brand equity (Benedek, 2017).

Shimp (2009, p.55) proposes two perspectives for brand value. The first perspective is based on the company's point of view, which focuses on the results by increasing brand value for the various stakeholders, since this increase in value generates a series of positive results, such as increased market share; brand loyalty; in addition to charging a special price, i.e., with the increase in brand value, the company can charge a higher value and its demand will be less flexible.

The second perspective is based on the customer's view of brand value, regardless of whether the customer is B2B (business to business) or B2C (business to consumer), i.e., whether the customer is a company or an individual, the brand will possess value to the extent that customers make strong and unique associations with the brand, i.e., value from the customer's view consists of two forms of knowledge, brand awareness and brand image. Silva and Rio (2016, p. 70) mentioned that:



Often the dimensions of perceptual image include terminology that is also subjective (e.g., "good climate," "natural beauty," or "interesting city"). Since the objective is to measure the final perception that tourists have of the destination (image), where tourists may have different concepts of what they consider "good", "interesting" or "beautiful", image studies necessarily refer to the tourist's subjective interpretation of reality..

Awareness refers to what comes to mind when the customer thinks of a certain category and how easily this brand is remembered. Brand image, on the other hand, is about what the customer remembers or what feelings come to mind when thinking about a particular brand. There are different perspectives on value, because what constitutes value is something extremely personal and idiosyncratic (Zeithaml, 1998). The very concept of "value" is complex, it can be found in various disciplines such as social psychology, economics, marketing, and management, causing there to be several definitions about the term.

Next, the methodological procedures of the research carried out, the results found, as well as the conclusion and references used, will be presented.

METHODOLOGICAL PROCEDURES

This study has an exploratory approach because, according to Malhotra (2001 apud Vieira, 2002), it provides greater familiarity with the problem, making it more explicit and aiming to build hypotheses and make it more explicit to the reader, enabling the understanding of the problem faced by the researcher. The research also has a descriptive approach, since it seeks to know and interpret reality without changing it (Churchill, 1987 apud Vieira, 2002).

The research is characterized as mixed (quali-quantitativa), as numerical and textual data were analyzed for a greater understanding of the touristologist's view, and it was also possible to obtain a greater amount of information with



the key questions. Content analysis, according to Bardin (2011), was used as a form of data processing.

The study was carried out by means of an online questionnaire with touristologists who work, live or have visited Ponta Negra/RN. The cut-off was made due to the respondents' professional qualification which is associated with the area studied and because they are responsible for disseminating local tourism directly or indirectly, as cited by Costa (2011), who mentions that brands need to be managed efficiently, in a management that combines real and symbolic elements, as well as the supports and means to disseminate its discourse, i.e., tourism professionals are also part of the dissemination of the destination, even if they are not acting directly in the tourism market.

The location was based on their knowledge of the place studied, since they frequent the area and are relevant to the research results. The year of graduation and the number of respondents was not limited, so that it was possible to obtain greater coverage in the answers. The collection instrument was composed of 23 questions, 11 open and 12 closed, with the purpose of accounting for the results but also to understand the motivations of some answers, as well as to cover a larger audience, since the cut-off for participation in the survey was having a bachelor's degree in tourism and living, working or having visited the place in the last year.

To construct the questions, a framework was built to better answer the specific objectives of this study, as can be seen in table 2.

Table 2. Key questions from the questionnaire to answer the research objectives

SPECIFIC OBJECTIVES	QUESTIONS
Analyze the positioning of the city of Natal/RN in the northeastern tourism from official data and the perception of tourism graduates	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Is Natal/RN among your first indications for visitation? ● If not, why not?
Describe and evaluate the current situation of the image of Ponta Negra/RN as a tourist destination from the perception of tourism graduates	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Would you indicate Ponta Negra/RN as an attraction to visit? ● When advertising the place, do you talk about the problems faced by the attraction? ● If yes, is there still interest in visiting the site after learning about the problems

<p>Profile the tourism graduates and analyze their perceptions regarding the image of the attraction Ponta Negra/RN</p>	<p>faced?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● In your perception, are other attractions in the city becoming more interesting and sought after than Ponta Negra/RN? ● Which attraction in Natal, in your view, could replace Ponta Negra/RN? ● In your perception, has the interest and search of tourists for getting to know Ponta Negra/RN been increasing or decreasing? ● Based on your perception and experience, is the feedback and reaction of tourists about visiting Ponta Negra/RN mostly positive or negative? Do you work, live or visited Ponta Negra/RN, in the last 12 months? ● In what year did you graduate in Tourism? ● In which institution? ● Gender ● Income ● Age range
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Source: Own elaboration based on the data obtained in the study.

Through the table it was possible to better visualize the need for answers to the specific objectives and elaborate the necessary questions to cover the questions and bring the views of the professionals, since the last question was about additional comments from the respondents about the research, where it was possible to better visualize the criticism about the theme addressed, this question contributed to confirm some data about what motivates the touristologist not to indicate the place or suggest other options of tourist attractions.

The questionnaire was available for response from October 19, 2019 to November 04, 2019. The google docs platform was used to prepare the online questionnaire, which allows for better visualization of the results and generation of graphs.

There were 51 answers, and from this total, 41 questionnaires were validated. However, in some questions, such as the question about the reason for indicating Ponta Negra/RN as an attraction and in graph 15, there were

respondents who were not within the context of the question, making it necessary to invalidate the answer.

For the analysis of the textual answers, the first words of each answer were selected, because it was the first characteristic remembered by the respondent, thus, these first characteristics were taken as the strongest points of the answers, with this, they were categorized in the graphics, as "insecurity", "beauty", "lack of structure".

RESULTS

Analysis of the brand value as a tourist attraction (Ponta Negra/RN): Positioning the city of Natal/RN in the northeastern tourism from official data and the perception of tourism graduates

In the following graphics, the positioning of the city and the attractions will be analyzed based on some official documents and surveys, then the positioning of Ponta Negra/RN will be analyzed through these documents and the answers collected, and then the evaluation of the perception of the tourism graduates based on the data collected through the online questionnaire. Natal/RN is a famous city as a Brazilian tourist destination and in the year 2019 the city's positioning among the demanded tourist destinations increased; according to the Survey of Travel Agencies and Organization Survey of the Ministry of Tourism (2019), Natal was in third place in the ranking of demanded tourist destinations for the months of June and July and in the second half of 2019 it rose one position in the ranking, overtaking Maceió(AL) and ranking second among destinations, behind only Fortaleza(CE). This research shows that although Natal currently presents several problems, such as security and infrastructure issues, the city is still widely sought after by tourists for the vacation months.



According to the Tourist Profile Report (2018) prepared by Fecomércio of Rio Grande do Norte, 32.2% of tourists responded that they got to know the destination through social networks; 26.9% responded that they used destination recommendation websites; 21.5% said they were recommended by friends and relatives to visit the state, in addition, they cited that they obtained information from travel blogs, apps, TV shows, travel guides, local websites; among other sources; confirming the information of the Tourism Destination Marketing Project of the Ministry of Tourism (2015) where it states that tourists are influenced by positive and/or negative information found about the place.

Initially it was asked to the respondents what was the first characteristic that they remembered when seeing an image of Ponta Negra/RN that was displayed in the questionnaire, some answers cited more than one characteristic and with that it was listed the first words mentioned in the answers, with that it was prepared the table 3, which shows these quantified answers.

Table 3. Initial characteristics remembered by the tourism graduates

CHARACTERISTIC	ANSWERS
Insecurity	3
Beauty	6
Postcard of the city	2
Rest	1
Fun	2
History	2
Dirt	1
Lack of infrastructure	2
Childhood	3
Quiet Sea	1
Morro do careca	18

Source: Own elaboration based on the data obtained in the study.

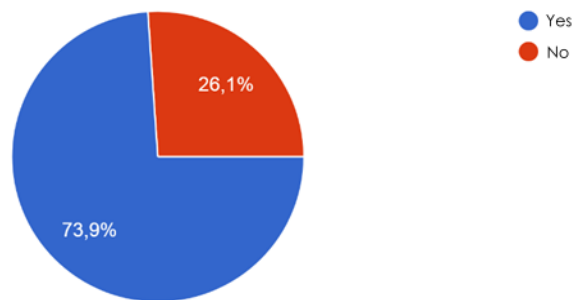
As mentioned by Perez (2004), the brand represents a connection that can be symbolic or affective, arousing feelings and creating a link through



what is offered, thus it was observed which feeling or memory was established by the respondents when seeing the image of the beach, then it was possible to note that some individuals associated the beach to their childhood and to their rest, besides some mentioning the factor of the beach being part of the history of the place, where it was taken as a summer beach of the people from Natal.

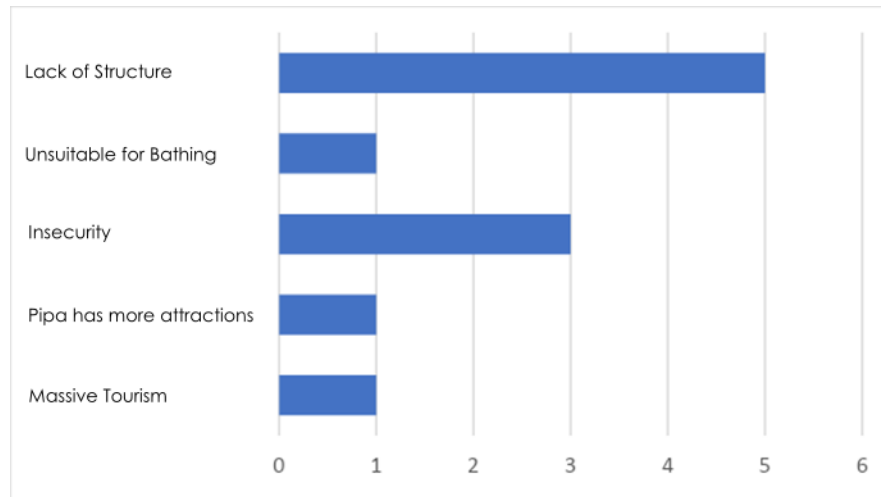
In graph 01, it was possible to notice that Natal is among the first indications of touristologists for visits, with 73.9% of favorable answers. However, an analysis was made on why the city would not be an option to be indicated by the professionals and 11 valid answers were obtained, in which the main negative points of the city that prevent it from being a destination option were mentioned, as shown in graph 2.

Graph 1. Natal as the first indication



Source: Own elaboration based on the data obtained in the study.

Graph 2. Reasons for not indicating the city



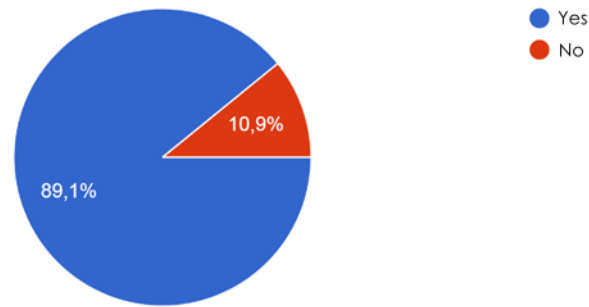
Source: Own elaboration based on the data obtained in the study.

The reason most reported by the tourismologists was the fact that the city does not have enough infrastructure to meet the demand with quality, and one of the respondents mentioned that there is a lack of nightlife attractions, which when associated with the fact of insecurity reported in the answers, becomes a plausible reason for not visiting the city.

Evaluation of the current situation of the image of Ponta Negra/RN as a tourist destination from the perception of tourism graduates

Tourists visiting RN seek mostly the beaches, as shown in the research of the Tourist Profile Report (2018) with 85% of visitors opting for these natural attractions. The positioning of Ponta Negra among the places visited by tourists is leading, with 80.1% of the responses, surpassing Pipa/RN which is one of the main attractions of the state. It is possible to notice this same leadership in graph 3, about the beach being among the first indications of the tourismologists as an attraction to visit, with 89.1% of the positive answers.

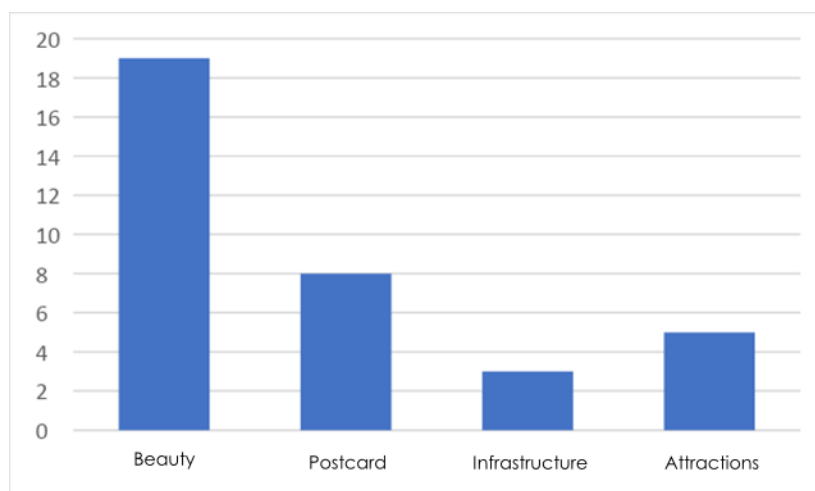
Graph 3. Indication of Ponta Negra/RN as tourist attraction



Source: Own elaboration based on the data obtained in the study.

According to graph 04, when asked the reason why the touristologists would recommend Natal for a visit, most of the respondents mentioned the beauty of the place, followed by the fact that the beach is the postcard of the city, they also mentioned as positive points the infrastructure of the place and the amount of attractions on the beach, such as restaurants, bars, etc.

Graph 4. Reasons for recommending the Ponta Negra beach/RN

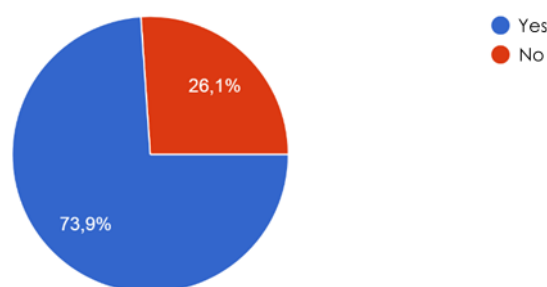


Source: Own elaboration based on the data obtained in the study.

However, when asked about the reasons for not recommending the beach, all the answers indicated the lack of adequate infrastructure, although there are still people who justify recommending the place because of the infrastructure, but when analyzing more deeply the reason for this duplicity, that is, what makes the infrastructure be criticized and praised at the same time, it was noticed that those who indicated as a positive point, evaluated the infrastructure in terms of the availability of restaurants and places to socialize, but those who used the reason to counter-indicate the site paid attention to the physical infrastructure, such as lack of sanitation, deteriorated waterfront and lack of cleanliness and lighting.

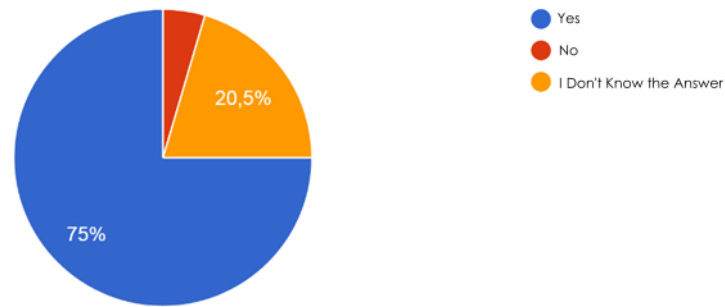
However, even though the majority chose to advertise the place and put it among their first options, 73.9% of those surveyed confirmed that they report the problems of the destination when making a recommendation as shown in graph 5, and regardless of the problems it is still noticeable in graph 6 an interest in visiting the city, with 75% confirming this questioning.

Graph 5. Disclosure of the local despite the problems



Source: Own elaboration based on the data obtained in the study.

Graph 6. Interest in visiting the site after learning about the problems

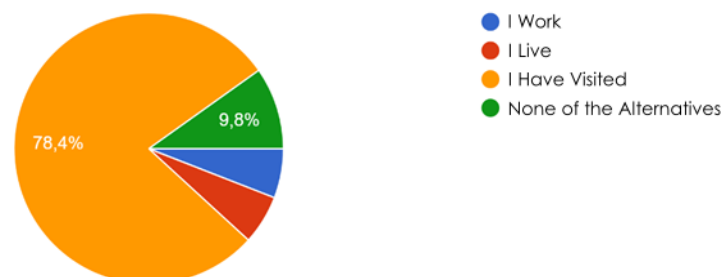


Source: Own elaboration based on the data obtained in the study.

Tourism graduates profile and their perceptions about the image of the attraction Ponta Negra/RN

In graph 7, it is observed that among the touristologists who participated in the survey, most respondents, with 78.4% of the answers, have visited Ponta Negra/RN, 5.9% work, and 5.9% live there.

Graph 7. Tourism graduates who live, work or work in Ponta Negra/RN

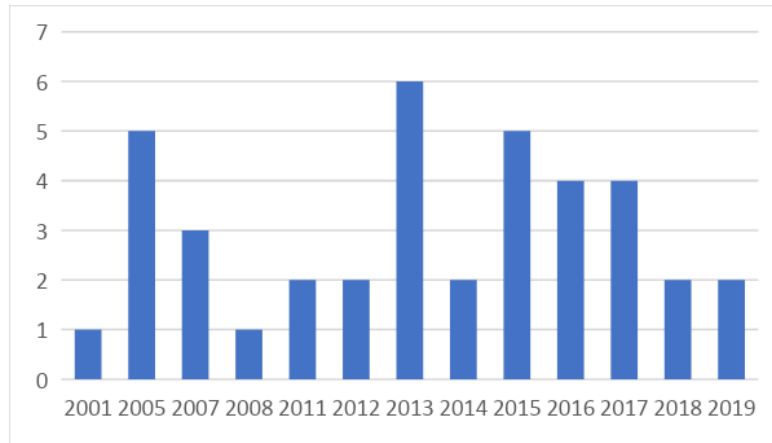


Source: Own elaboration based on the data obtained in the study.

As observed in graph 8, the tourismologists who responded to the survey, are mostly graduated in the year 2013, followed by 2005 and 2015 and

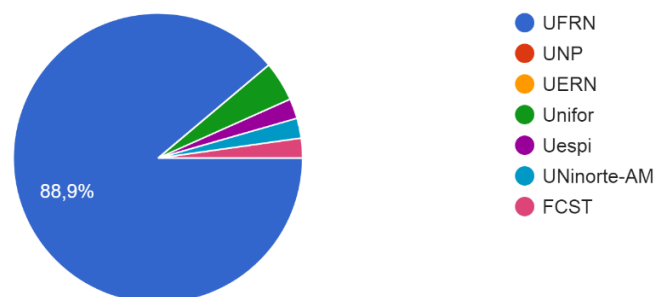
as shown in graph 9, 88.9% are graduated from UFRN, UNIFOR is in second place among the training institutions of those surveyed.

Graph 8. Graduation year of the tourism graduates



Source: Own elaboration based on the data obtained in the study.

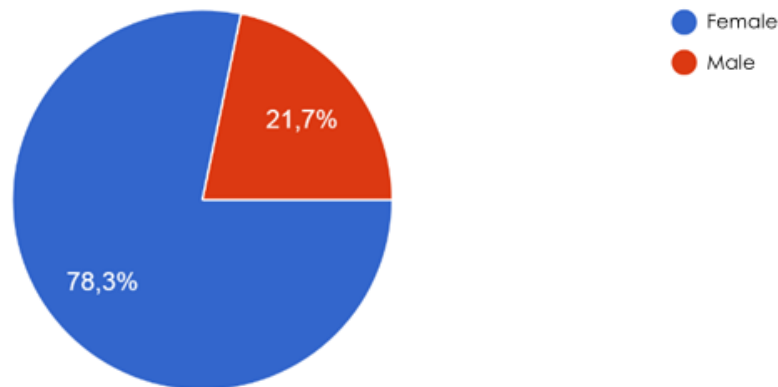
Graph 9. Institution of academic formation



Source: Own elaboration based on the data obtained in the study.

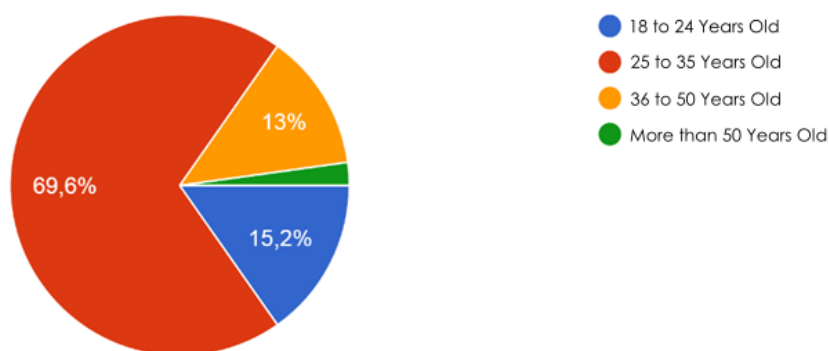
According to graph 10, 78.3% of the respondents are female, with 21.7% male audience. In graph 11 it can be observed that most of the respondents are in the age group of 25 to 35 years, graph 12 shows that 69.9% of the respondents are composed of singles and 60.9% earning between 1 and 3 minimum wages, as found in graph 13.

Graph 10: Gender of the participants

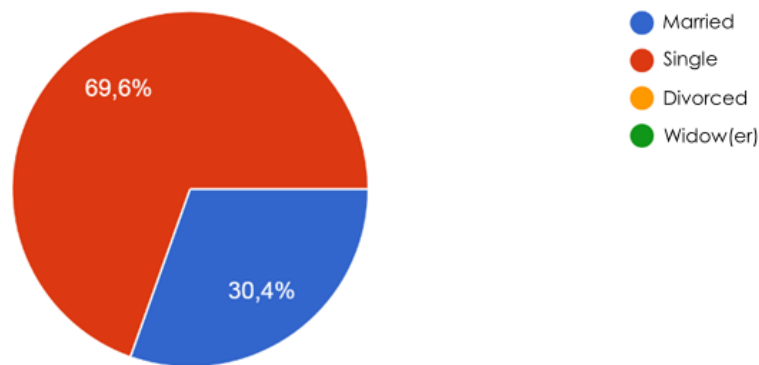


Source: Own elaboration based on the data obtained in the study.

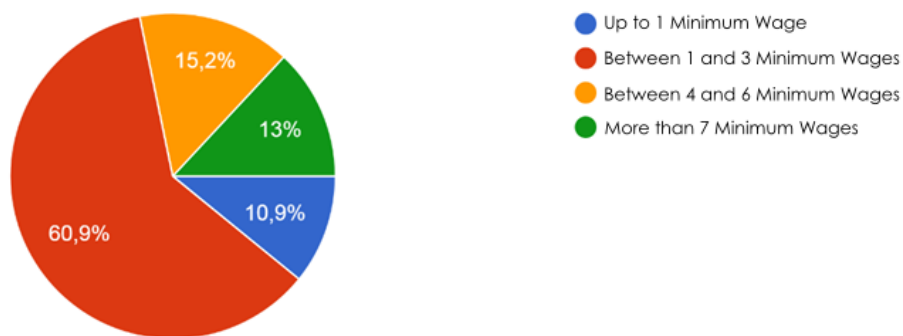
Graph 11: Age range of the participants



Source: Own elaboration based on the data obtained in the study.

Graph 12. marital status of the participants

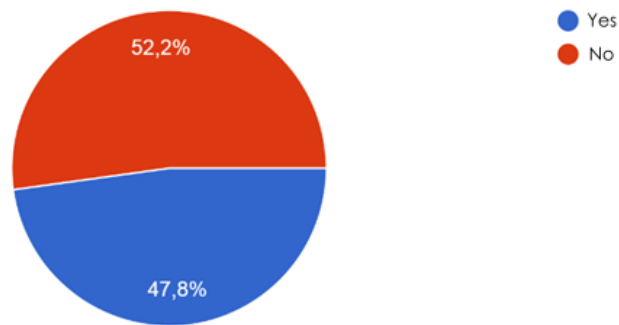
Source: Own elaboration based on the data obtained in the study.

Graph 13: Participants' income

Source: Own elaboration based on the data obtained in the study.

The beach of Ponta Negra/RN shares the tourists' attention with several other attractions in the region, but it is interesting to know if the touristologists believe that other points in the city are becoming more attractive. As can be seen in graph 14, the answers to this questioning were mostly negative, with 52.2% of those surveyed denying that other places are becoming more sought after or more interesting than the beach.

Graph 14. Attractions are becoming more popular than Ponta Negra/RN

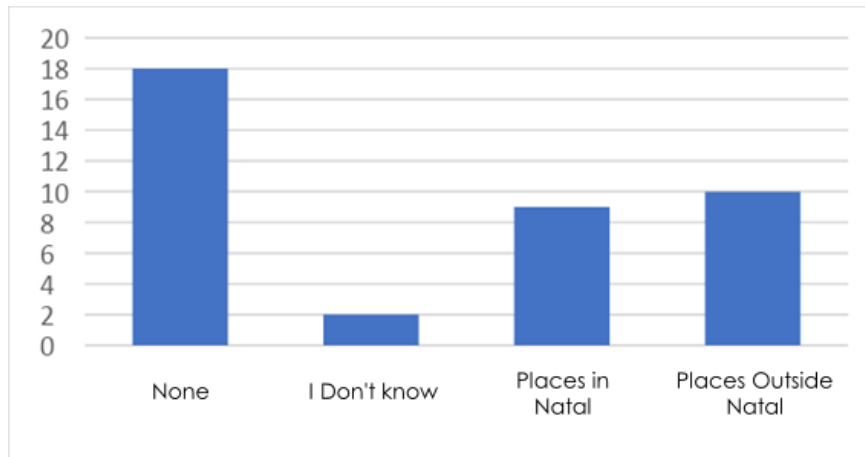


Source: Own elaboration based on the data obtained in the study.

However, one factor that called our attention, from the 22 people who confirmed that other attractions in the city are becoming more sought after than Ponta Negra/RN, 20 answered the questioning about which of these attractions are becoming interesting, however, half of the respondents mentioned places outside Natal, even though the question emphasized for the second time that it would be to think of some attraction in the city, at this moment they did not remember other attractions and directed their thoughts out of Natal, which can be a negative factor when one thinks about planning a tourism directed to the city, once the professionals themselves did not remember that the city may have other pleasant places to visit.

As shown in graph 15, when asked about which place in Natal could substitute the beach of Ponta Negra/RN, of the 39 valid answers, 18 people answered that no place could substitute the beach and 9 people answered other urban beaches like Redinha and Miami Beach for example. Of these answers, 10 respondents answered with places that are located outside the city such as Pipa/RN and Genipabu/RN and two did not remember any place.

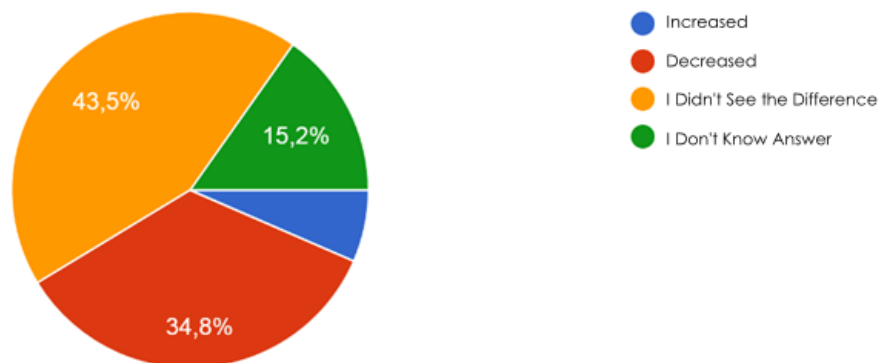
Graph 15. Attraction that could replace Ponta Negra/RN



Source: Own elaboration based on the data obtained in the study.

When it comes to the perception of the tourismologists about the interest of tourists being decreased or not, many did not notice any difference, but in 34.8% of the answers a decrease in the interest for the beach was noticed, as seen in graph 16.

Graph 16. Perception about increase or decrease of interest in Ponta Negra beach/RN

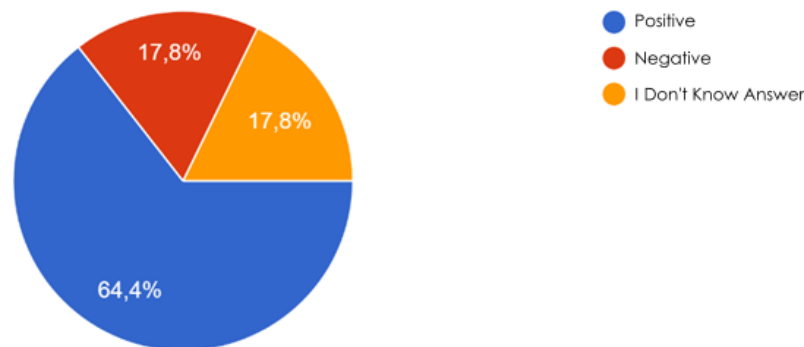


Source: Own elaboration based on the data obtained in the study.

Despite the negative points, in graph 17 it is possible to observe that the tourismologists said that there is still a good return when it comes to the experience during the trip, since 64.4% of those surveyed responded that the feedback from tourists is positive, which becomes a positive factor, as

observed in the statement of Wheeler (2008) when he mentions that the brand has the responsibility to achieve the expectations that were caused in the consumer, whether the product is tangible or not, that is, the beach can still achieve the expectations of visitors in the perception of touristologists.

Graph 17. Perception about feedback from tourists



Source: Own elaboration based on the data obtained in the study.

Among the positive and negative points reported in the tourists' feedbacks, the main negative point is the insecurity and lack of structure and the positive ones showed mostly that the tourist is enchanted with the beauty of the place, one of the interviewees also added that tourists ignore some negative aspects, because the desire to know the beach is greater and hospitality ends up influencing the visitor's experience and causing them not to pay attention only to the negative experiences, that is, it is proven that the positive factors of the place influence the perception of the tourist during the visit, as mentioned by Babić-Hodović (2014) and by Veríssimo et al. (2017) who states about the contribution with the return to the destination.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Through the research it was possible to observe that the image of Natal/RN and the Ponta Negra beach/RN continue to be well positioned

among the touristologists and among the tourists, given the results of the questionnaire combined with the results in the official documents, concluding that the beach has not been losing its value, but some factors may influence the fall of its image in the future.

Given this, if some action is not taken on the issues of insecurity and structure of the place, because most of the motivations for not indicating or the feedbacks of tourists report these negative factors, the tourist flow may migrate more and more to the beaches outside the axis of Natal, and this brings another factor observed in the results, which was the forgetfulness of part of the touristologists about the existence of other potential tourist spots in the city, which certainly contributes to the non-appreciation of local attractions.

Despite this observation, most of the respondents cited that they do not believe that there is another place that can replace Ponta Negra/RN and some cited other places within the urban axis, which is a positive point, as it reinforces the answer to the main question of the research, that Ponta Negra/RN is not losing its value. However, this study may open a series of future researches and approaches on the theme, since the research was elaborated with a small sample for an initial understanding about the perception of the touristologists.

This research had some limitations, such as the amount of work on the theme and the understanding of some respondents, who may have understood some questions differently or possibly not read the initial description of the questionnaire and answered it, or even without having the title of touristologist. However, it was interesting to understand the touristologist's point of view about the image of a tourist destination and to have raised questions and reflections that had not been elaborated before the beginning of the research.

This way, the study can be expanded to other professionals, such as tour guides, based on a qualitative research, in order to approach the theme with more detail on the subject and the results.



It is also worth noting about the Lovemarks theory that was developed by Kevin Roberts (2004, p. 60) which is defined as "the brands and companies that create genuine emotional connections with the communities and networks to which they relate". The author stresses that a "brand of love" can be for a product, a person, a service, or even a city. For further studies it is indicated the research with the object of study of a city as a possible lovemark, in the perception of tourists.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

This study was financed in part by the Coordenação de Aperfeiçoamento de Pessoal de Nível Superior – Brazil (CAPES) – Finance Code 001.

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Author contributions



Mariana Bárbara de Souza - Definition of the research problem and objectives, development of the theoretical proposition, carrying out the literature review and theoretical foundation, data collection, data analysis, preparation of tables and graphs and writing of the manuscript.

Islaine Cristiane Oliveira Gonçalves da Silva Cavalcante - Definition of the research problem and objectives, development of the theoretical proposition, choice of methodological procedures, carrying out the literature review, writing of the manuscript, critical review of the text, alignment of research and translation.

