

## The São Teotónio Hostel and the Portuguese Way of 'Santiago': A Case Study

**Abstract.** This paper analyzes brand management in the hotel sector. This process led to an interest in understanding the operations of the São Teotónio Municipal Hostel, located on the Portuguese Way of 'Santiago'. Our literature search revealed few studies on municipal hostels. Therefore, the overall objective is to analyze how the hostel can be better recognized to promote a better accommodation experience for pilgrims. To this end, we interviewed pilgrims who follow the Way of 'Santiago', evaluated the communication strategies used by the São Teotónio Hostel, and sought to identify the main factors that limit and enable the hostel's recognition as a brand. This case study is an investigation within the context of religious tourism in Portugal. Our methodology involved quantitative and qualitative analysis, through a questionnaire administered to 115 pilgrims and interviews. The scientific relevance of this study is noteworthy, as it aims to highlight a gap in studies on public hostels and the importance of branding for religious and cultural tourism. The results allowed us to infer that, even though it is an institution maintained by the government, communication and marketing strategies are crucial for good publicity and guidance to pilgrims.

**Keywords:** Marketing, Branding, Way of Santiago, Religious Tourism, São Teotónio Hostel

### 1. Introduction

This article is a case study in the context of Religious Tourism—the Way of 'Santiago'—in Portugal. Several scientific studies discuss the relevance of how marketing can support and enhance brand awareness and generate value for potential customers. However, when researching on Google Scholar and other websites, we realized that few studies analyze the reality of municipal hostels, especially those of this type of accommodation, which is part of the Portuguese Way of 'Santiago'. Therefore, the need for this research arose: the main question being, how to increase brand recognition for the São Teotónio Municipal Hostel, which is part of the Way of 'Santiago'.

Thus, we aimed to understand the operation and challenges faced by the São Teotónio municipal hostel, namely the hostel's lack of communication with the public and the lack of communication to manage its image in the minds of consumers, given that this establishment is maintained by the municipal government and aims to ensure equal access. This is unlike private hostels, which have websites, social media, and are active both online and offline. To answer these questions, the general objective was to analyze how the hostel can be better (re)known to promote better accommodation experience for pilgrims. To this end, the following specific objectives were listed: interview pilgrims who follow the Way of 'Santiago' route; evaluate the communication strategies used by the São Teotónio Hostel; and identify the main factors that limit and enable the hostel's recognition as a brand.

It was crucial to understand how pilgrims themselves could contribute to this goal. Therefore, this study is based on both quantitative and qualitative research, aiming to validate the findings by cross-referencing data and interpreting the information. Thus, we administered a questionnaire and conducted two interviews (with the receptionist and the local tourism manager) at the hostel's location in Valença do Minho. To this end, this article is organized, in addition to this introductory part, a literature review with the fundamental theoretical aspects to understand this theme, methodology, analysis of the results and the final considerations that present a brief reflection and suggestion for improving the Albergue São Teotónio brand.

### 2. Literature review

The Way of Santiago began when the apostle James the Greater embarked on his journey of faith, passing through the nations, spreading the word of Jesus. He focused on the Iberian Peninsula, where he traveled through the south of present-day Spain, passing through Andalusia until reaching Lisbon, and then continuing

north. The prophet preached the word in the villages and cities he traveled through. Like other religious leaders of the time, he was beheaded for spreading ideas that disturbed the empire. His body was taken to Galicia, where a cathedral was built on the site. A settlement emerged that is now known as Santiago de Compostela. Since the 11th century, Compostela has received pilgrims from various countries, and for this reason, different itineraries have emerged that lead to Santiago de Compostela.

Spanish politics has been boosting this tourism with Portugal, establishing partnerships to promote this tourist destination globally, which benefits the national economy. Consequently, new hotels and hostels are being established along this route, seeking innovation to meet the demands of this type of tourism. Valença do Minho is a city located in northern Portugal, bordering Spain via the city of Tui, situated on the banks of the Minho River. It stands out nationally and internationally for possessing one of the region's main military fortifications: the Fortaleza (Fortress). It serves as a space for social interaction, a tourist, commercial, and economic route open to the world, receiving many visitors, especially Spanish and Portuguese on weekends. In the words of Duarte (2026), the Portuguese Way as a factor in tourism development in the municipality of Barcelos refers to the understanding of what this Way means to those willing to travel it, how it emerged, its political involvement, and its cultural and economic importance to the cities it passes through. Additionally, Torre et al., 2010, cited by the author, supports the writing of this article, since it defines pilgrimage as a path that has a route of places that direct travelers to a destination.

São Teotónio Municipal Hostel is located in Valencia and is a relevant lodging option for pilgrims venturing on the Camino de Santiago. Established in 2005, it was billed as the first pilgrim hostel in Portugal. It is a mixed hostel where everyone shares the same facilities: bathroom, kitchen, living room, bedroom, and more. This space is located near the Fortress, a tourist attraction in the city, and next to the Fire Department and the Continente market. They accept pilgrims traveling the Camino de Santiago as well as those traveling to Fátima, where the Sanctuary of Our Lady of Fátima is located. When viewing the São Teotónio Municipal Hostel, it's important to understand that this brand should be promoted so that pilgrims recognize it through more effective communication. Thus, its uniqueness lies in the accommodation itself, its quality/affordability ratio, making it the ideal accommodation for a pilgrim.

A fundamental concept for beginning this dialogue is defining what a brand is. According to studies by Kotler and Keller (2019), supported by the American Marketing Association (AMA), a brand can be a symbol, a name, or a combination of the two; however, the intent is for the final product to identify a good or service and differentiate it from competitors that produce the same service/product. This difference may lie in the veracity of the brand's performance, as well as in what it symbolizes. As the aforementioned authors state: "A brand is a promise between the company and the consumer." In other words, if a company says it will promote an effect or will mean something, it must deliver. Kotler and Keller (2019) define marketing as "meeting needs while generating profit" by "transforming a personal or social need into a lucrative business opportunity." This is a sound idea, as marketing transforms something people need into something attractive and timely, especially for businesses; this is profitable. It's crucial to understand that marketing's focus isn't solely on sales; in the case of the hostel, profit is more closely tied to meeting needs and generating recognition for the hostel. Therefore, marketing can promote the hostel by finding an opportunity to impact tourism in the city of Valença.

Marketing communications are important for capturing attention, engaging pilgrims, creating a community of guests who carry the hostel's hallmark and recommend it to others, and remaining a relevant brand. Based on this premise, Dourado (2014) used Amaral's (2008) ideas to elucidate this point of view regarding communication. The marketing communications mix aims to make an organization, a company, a personality, and its services recognized as attractive, and unforgettable for potential customers. It is also a way to continue winning over consumers, as studies by Kotler and Keller (2019) show, maintaining a loyal customer is more cost-effective than acquiring new ones.

When referring to marketing, it's important to also relate it to hotel marketing. Regarding this aspect, Castelli (2003) addresses three crucial points: the first concerns that the hotel industry needs to be customer oriented. In this sense, the hostel must analyze the customer's desires, what the pilgrim is looking for in accommodations, what their needs and preferences are, and work accordingly. The second point relates to customer satisfaction, and the third refers to integrated action, meaning that all points of contact the pilgrim should have with the hotel must be consistent with its audience, both in the physical and virtual spaces. To support this argument, it's

essential to highlight the author who discusses the importance of the website for marketing. Mondo (2011) argues that the website is a tool that promotes and communicates the hostel, or even other online modalities.

Marketing evolves with the digital age. Every day, the need arises to impact and captivate people more instantly and effortlessly through digital channels such as social media, email, blogs, websites, and others. With a click on a cell phone, tons of information circulate and generate consumer interest. In this regard, Kotler et al. (2017) argue that the aforementioned digital channels serve as a link between customers and the company, and between customers and other customers, exchanging information, feedback, and suggesting specific content. In other words, online brands truly reflect what people want. The use of digital channels and data analysis tools enables the building of closer relationships, real-time management of online reputation, and the adaptation of offers based on consumer behavior (Buhalis & Sinarta, 2019). In this sense, accommodations that invest in digital marketing can not only attract new customers but also retain existing ones, strengthening their competitiveness in a highly dynamic and globalized market.

To support this argument, it's crucial to highlight the author who discusses the importance of websites for marketing. Mondo (2011) argues that websites are tools that promote and communicate the hostel, or even other types of accommodations, online. In other words, in this online space, customers can learn about the costs associated with staying at the property, have contact to interact and obtain information, and access images of the hotel and guest reviews. In many cases, there are websites that allow guests to share photos of their stay, and there are websites that have an associated blog to address related content, such as restaurant options, or even a space to answer pilgrims' questions. Ultimately, a hotel website is essential for maintaining customer relationships and loyalty. Therefore, it's important to emphasize that the website's benefit is reaching people in diverse locations. According to Kotler and Keller (2019), the marketing communication mix includes advertising, public relations, direct marketing, mobile marketing, and others. Therefore, website optimization is of utmost importance to ensure more visits and more clicks on the page in search engines. *Destination branding* plays a decisive role in how territories are perceived and experienced by visitors. Pike (2018) argues that territorial brand management must go beyond the creation of slogans or logos, requiring a strategic approach that considers cultural authenticity, competitive differentiation, and the participation of various stakeholders. At the same time, the digital transformation in the tourism sector has expanded the possibilities for interaction between destinations and tourists. Sigala (2020) emphasizes that digital tourism is not limited to the use of technological tools, but implies a profound reconfiguration of business models, value creation, and the dynamics of co-creation between organizations and consumers. The connection between destination branding and digital tourism is therefore fundamental to building immersive experiences, strengthening the identity of destinations, and enhancing their competitiveness in a constantly changing global market.

### 3. Methodology

According to the authors (Creswell & Creswell, 2018), scientific research should be conducted systematically, well-founded, and guided by a clear methodological framework. The choice of research method—qualitative, quantitative, or mixed—should be aligned with the study's objectives and the nature of the research problem. This approach ensures the validity of the results, promotes scientific rigor, and enables consistent interpretations that contribute to the advancement of knowledge. Furthermore, the authors emphasize the importance of a solid theoretical framework and ethical procedures that ensure the credibility and integrity of the research process.

According to Paulo Freire (2013), "I research to verify, by verifying, glimpsing, intervening, and educating myself. I research to know what I don't yet know and to communicate or announce the new"; these are inspiring words for us to reflect on why and for what we research in the academic context. As the author emphasizes, we research to discover, to intervene, and to find answers to the questions that concern us. We inquire to produce new knowledge, to rephrase what has already been said, to set goals and communicate results. In this sense, the term "research" is inseparable from learning and must be present in academic teaching to achieve success in the search for new knowledge, especially for marketing professionals.

In terms of methodology, this study is a mixed-method approach. It aims to qualify and quantify the forms, means, and activities of communication and promotion of the São Teotónio Municipal Hostel in Vales do Minho, Portugal, as it becomes better known, proposing suggestions for brand improvements. In the search for a research topic, the authors began with personal reflection to understand the most relevant topics to study. Subsequently, we entered keywords into Google Scholar, such as "brand management," "hospitality," "case studies," "branding," and "communication," to understand how this topic is currently being addressed.

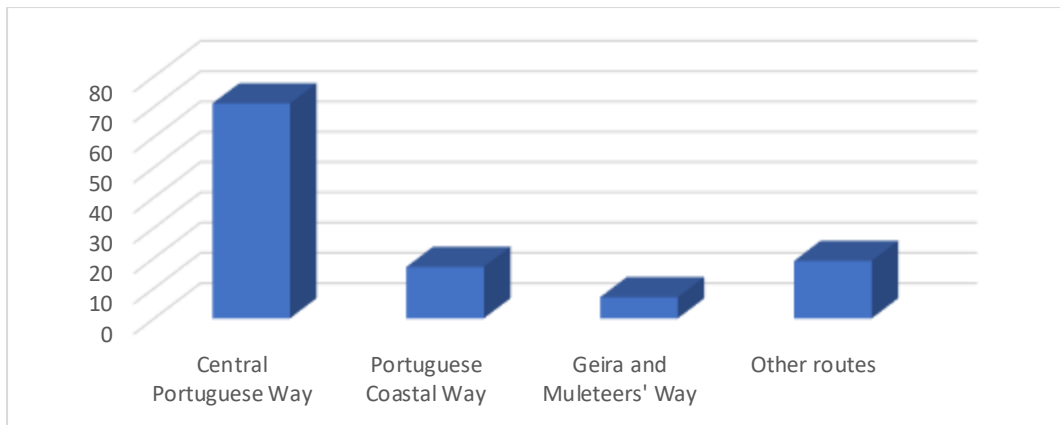
Previously published articles and dissertations available from reliable sources were consulted. This decision is based on Prodanov and Freitas (2013), who emphasize the importance of updating knowledge through scientific investigation of existing works. After defining the topic, delimiting the research locus proved crucial for the development of the study, as well as for the development of the questionnaire for pilgrims. To this end, a pre-test was conducted by the authors, together with three pilgrims, to assess the clarity of the wording and the adequacy of the instrument's interpretation. This survey was posted in Facebook groups (Camino de Santiago and Portuguese Way of Santiago) and WhatsApp groups (Camino Português and Camino de Santiago - gruposviajeros.com) specifically for pilgrims to share their experiences, in order to collect samples from diverse nationalities and reach a significant number of respondents. A bibliographical search was conducted and materials produced on the research topic were analyzed. Thus, while walking through the city of Valença, it was noticed that, in the hotel sector, there is a hostel called Albergue São Teotónio, maintained by the public initiative, which houses pilgrims who follow the tourist route known as the Camino de Santiago and the pilgrimage to the Sanctuary of Our Lady of Fátima. As a qualitative methodology, a pilot interview with the receptionist was conducted to identify the research locus and understand how the São Teotónio Municipal Hostel operates. An interview was also conducted with the head of tourism in Valença do Minho. In this interview, we obtained information about the hostel's management by the Valença do Minho municipality's communications team, which has a Facebook page and publishes information about the hostel whenever a municipal-related event takes place. The hostel's communications are non-commercial, as it is a public space. However, it is argued that the hostel plays a highly relevant social and touristic role, and that the municipality could invest in building a Facebook community dedicated to this establishment, with the aim of informing about the space and, through pilgrims, also promoting the city and its restaurants.

#### **4. Results analysis**

To this end, when interviewing the receptionist, she asked: What could Albergue São Teotónio do to stand out more on the route? The interviewee reported that one of the greatest difficulties for pilgrims, despite the Camino de Santiago being well-known and well-publicized, was: "Many people know the route; however, to get to the hostel, there could be more arrows and more signs indicating the direction of the hostel." This would facilitate access. When asked how reservations are made at Albergue São Teotónio, the interviewee reported that stays are on a first-come, first-served basis and made directly at the counter. This year (2025), in the winter, Albergue São Teotónio received many pilgrims, something unusual compared to previous years in the months of December, January, and February, as these are months with little traffic. As she reported: "It was rare that we had no one there. Can you believe it? It seems like the number of pilgrims will increase this year!" According to the receptionist, between 5,000 and 6,000 people passed through the hostel in 2024.

This space has capacity for 49 people. It has 22 bunk beds and two rooms with two beds for the elderly and people with reduced mobility. It has a common room, kitchen, spacious garden, and bathroom. When asked about the daily rates, the interviewee replied that they cost 8 euros per person. Pilgrims stay for one night, except for those with health problems or physical impairments during the journey. The São Teotónio hostel has been in operation since 2005, and the municipality has plans for improvements, as the space currently shows clear signs of deterioration, and pilgrims are increasingly demanding, which they may attribute to competition in the region for more comfortable and newer lodging options. Regarding the surveys, we present the results obtained from questionnaires administered to a total of 115 respondents, 114 of whom were authorized to use their responses to achieve the results proposed in this study. The majority of respondents were Portuguese and Spanish. The first question asked concerns the choice of the Way of Santiago.

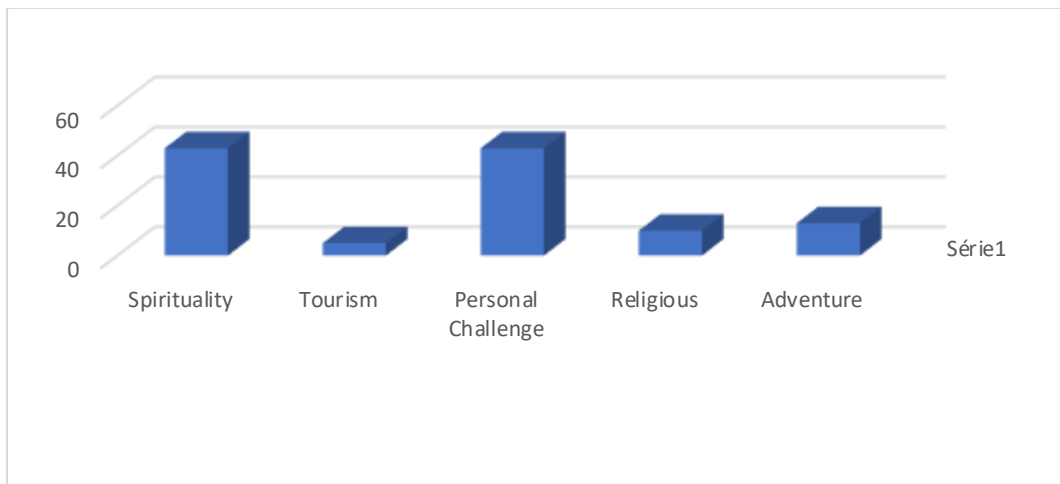
### 1 - Which Camino de Santiago are you travelling to, or have you already traveled?



**Figure 1:** Paths leading to Santiago de Compostela in Portugal. (Source authors)

According to the questionnaire, 71 pilgrims responded that they had already walked the Central Portuguese Way; 17 pilgrims responded that they had walked the Coastal Portuguese Way. However, a considerable number, approximately 19, responded that they had walked other routes, including the French Way, the English Way, the Primitive Way, the Fisterra Way, and Muxia, which do not pass through Portugal. This also includes pilgrims who began their journey in the Minho Valleys. Therefore, 71 pilgrims passed through Valença do Minho.

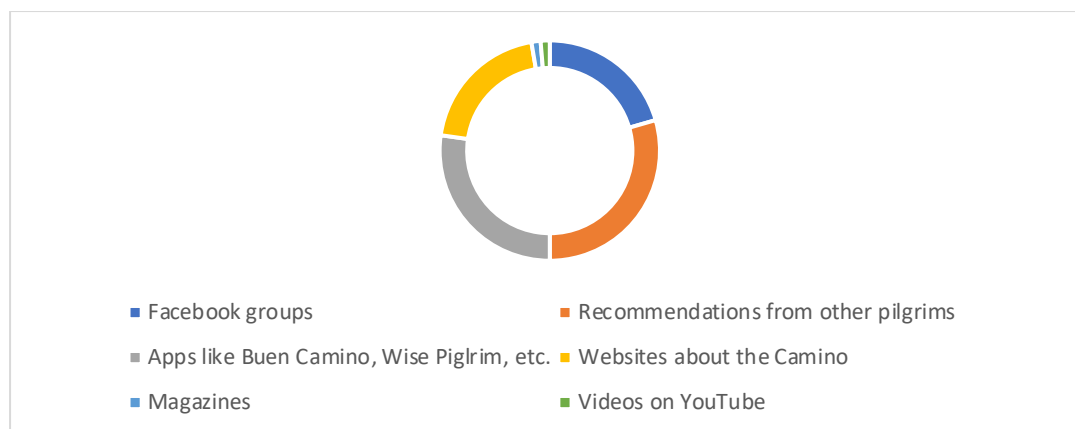
### 2 - What was the main reason that led you to do the Camino de Santiago?



**Figure 2:** The intentions that motivate pilgrims to undertake the Camino de Santiago. (Source authors)

According to the accounts presented in Figure 2, there are a variety of reasons why people walk the Camino de Santiago, and this data reflects this. Thus, 43 respondents walked for spirituality, 43 for personal challenge, and 13 for adventure, reflecting the diversity of the route. All had different goals on the journey to Santiago.

### 3 - Where do you look for information on accommodations to plan your route?



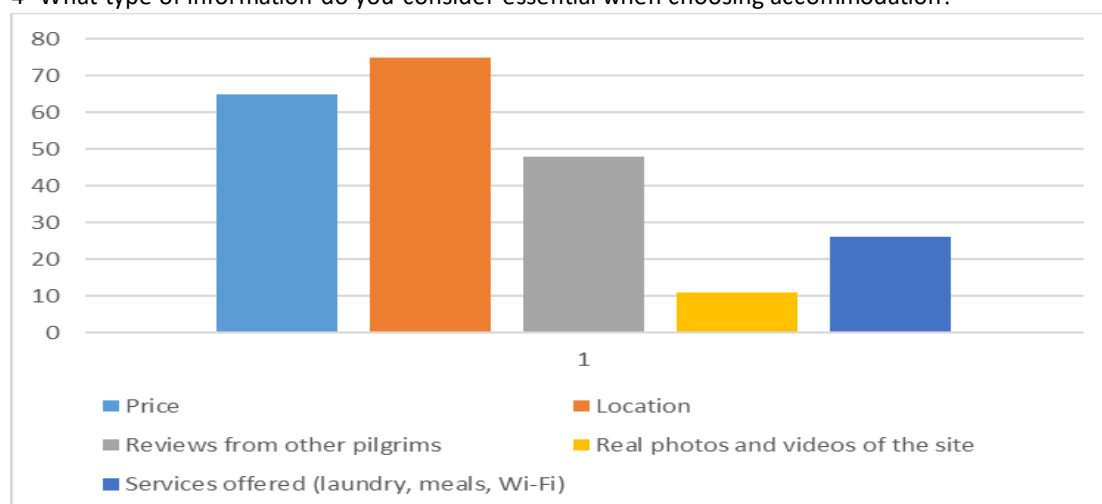
**Figure 3:** Places where pilgrims seek information about accommodations to organize their trip. (Source authors)

When asked where pilgrims look for information about accommodation, the results show that respondents prefer recommendations from fellow pilgrims, searching for information in apps, on websites that discuss the Camino, and in Facebook groups.

In the case of the municipal hostel, which is a public institution, advertising could be carried out through a Facebook group or a website could be created with content explaining the hostel's identity and expertise, encouraging people to learn about it within the pilgrim community. Especially after the proposed renovations, this is a way to reposition the brand, allowing pilgrims who have already been there to relive the experience in a better place. It's also a mechanism to generate brand awareness, so that pilgrims become aware of the hostel and consider it a lodging option when planning their itinerary. It could also impact people who have already stayed there or who identify with it by mentioning it to others.

Another aspect to consider is that well-crafted advertising allows consumers to retain unique and positive ideas, feelings, symbols, and associations related to the brand. It thus conveys the perception that the brand has invested in something pleasurable, capable of awakening nostalgia and evoking memories, such as those of a hostel experienced along the Way. In this regard, one of the fundamental questions included in the questionnaire was: what information is essential for a pilgrim when choosing accommodation? The responses indicated that the determining factors are price, location, and reviews from other pilgrims. As shown in Figure 4.

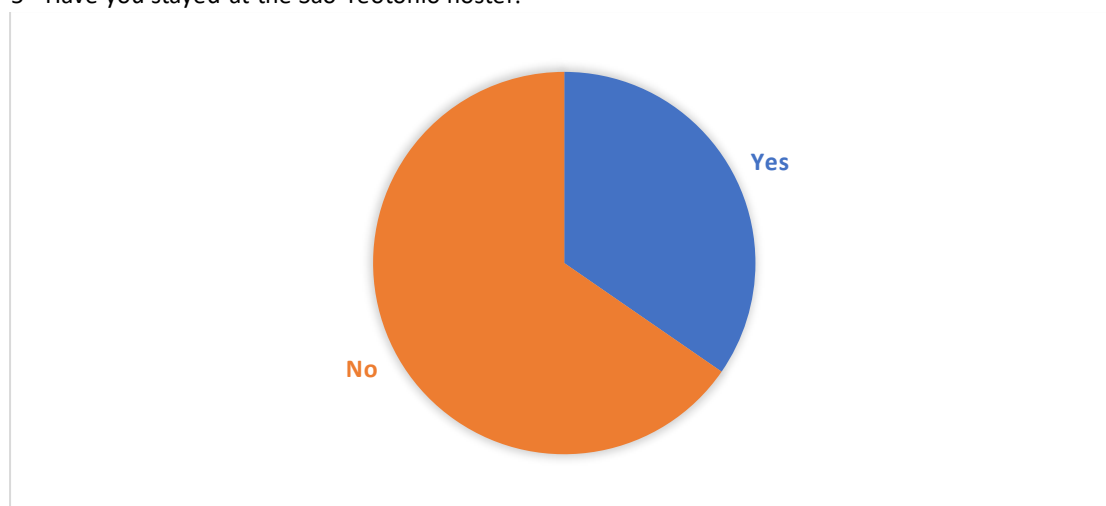
### 4 -What type of information do you consider essential when choosing accommodation?



**Figure 4:** Places where pilgrims seek information about accommodations to organize their trip. (Source authors)

We can see that the most relevant information for pilgrims is: location and price, as well as observations, opinions of other pilgrims, and the services offered by the hostel. Therefore, it is necessary to display not only on the hostel's existing Facebook page, but also on its future corporate website and the company's Google profile, to address any questions that may arise. As explained above, the content must be visually appealing and engaging, encouraging pilgrims to plan their itinerary and be prepared to reach their destination.

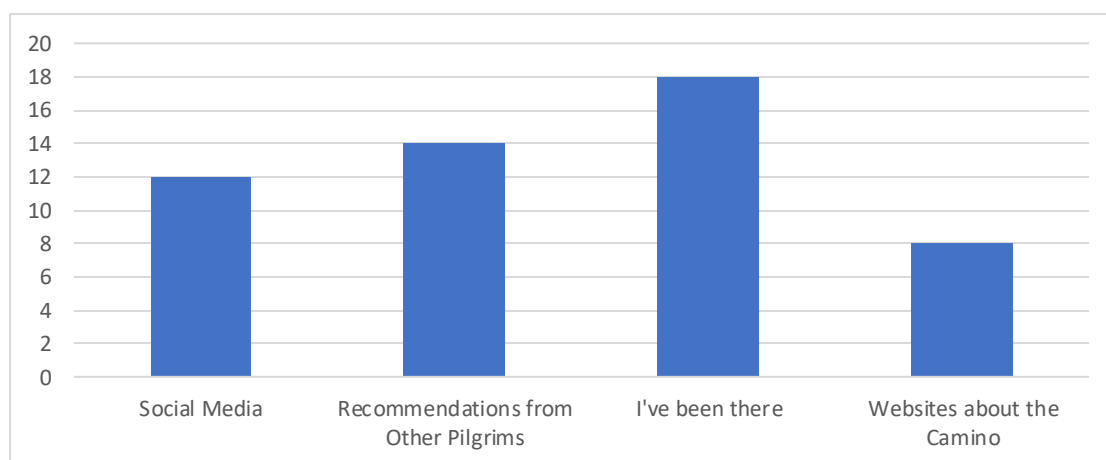
#### 5 - Have you stayed at the São Teotónio hostel?



**Figure 5:** Information about the number of people who stayed at the hostel. (Source authors)

As shown in Figure 5, of the 44 interviewees who stated they were familiar with the São Teotónio Municipal Hostel, 18 had stayed there, while 34 had never used it. Additionally, pilgrims indicated that they learned about the hostel through various channels: some came across it during their journey, others received recommendations from fellow pilgrims, and some discovered it through social media, particularly Facebook groups. These groups serve as a relevant channel for finding information about accommodation, providing a space for interaction and exchange of experiences among pilgrims. According to Figure 6.

#### 6 - How did you find out about the hostel?

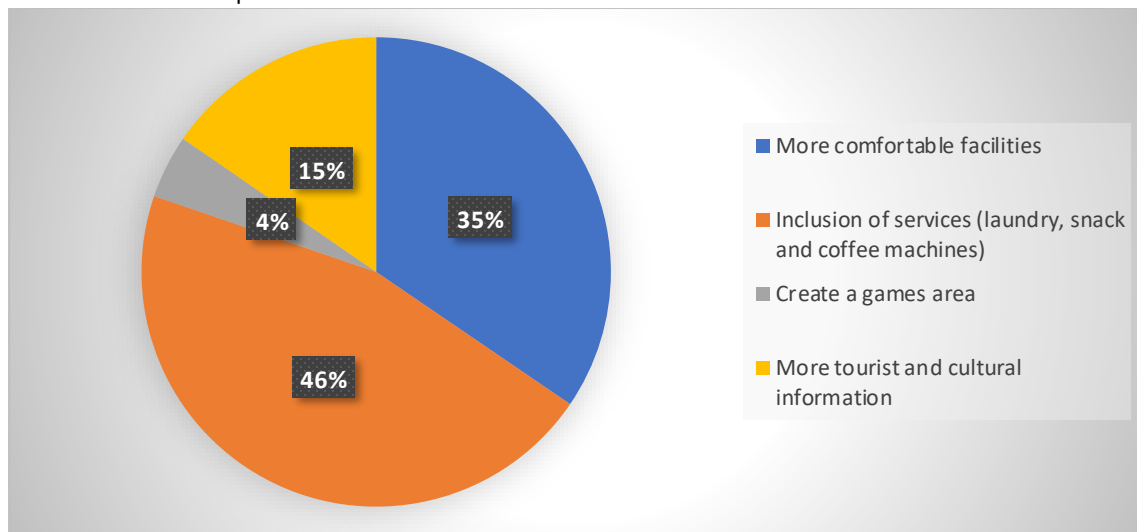


**Figure 6:** How pilgrims discovered the hostel. (Source: authors)

As shown in Graph 6, 72 participants indicated that, although the São Teotónio Municipal Hostel was not their preferred choice, viewing the interior images of the spaces would motivate them to consider staying there.

Analysis of the qualitative responses reveals key perceptions about the user experience: pilgrims highlighted aspects of cleanliness, simplicity, hospitality, and functionality. Comments such as "humble, but clean," "welcoming place, suitable for pilgrims," and "with all the essentials" indicate that, even in older spaces or those with basic infrastructure, the perception of care and hospitality plays a decisive role in the decision to stay. At the same time, suggestions for improvements emerged, including adding curtains to the bunk beds and improving the bathroom conditions, reflecting the importance of comfort and privacy to the pilgrim experience. This set of responses highlights that, in the context of pilgrimage tourism, emotional connection and the perception of welcome often override structural aspects, aligning with concepts of user-centered hospitality, in which symbolic and affective factors strongly influence satisfaction and intention to return.

#### 7 - What could be improved at the hostel?

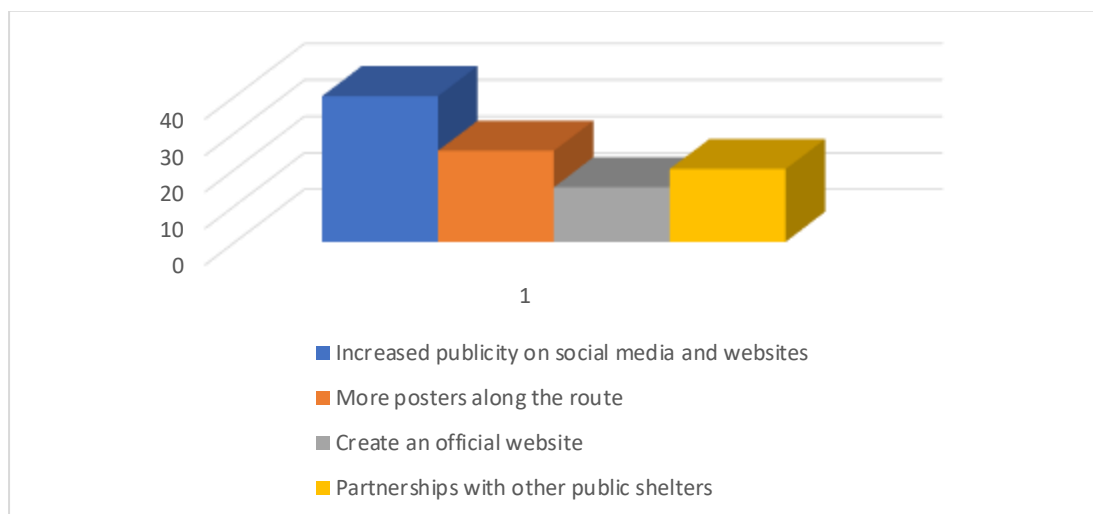


**Figure 7:** Represents what could be improved in the hostel. (Source authors)

A question was included to identify possible improvements to the hostel. Among respondents familiar with the São Teotônio Municipal Hostel, 74.35% mentioned the need for "more comfortable facilities," citing improvements such as higher-quality bunk beds and multiple shower options. Meanwhile, 98.46% suggested "adding services," including a laundry room and vending machines for snacks and drinks to support the continuation of the walk. These improvement suggestions represent an opportunity to increase the hostel's recognition; however, this information must be adequately disseminated, both on the future institutional website and in Facebook groups, so that pilgrims are aware of the services available at the municipal hostel. To reinforce this analysis, all pilgrims—regardless of whether they were familiar with the hostel—were asked the following question: What could the hostel do to stand out on the Camino de Santiago route? The responses presented a uniformity of patterns, as illustrated in Figure 8, evidencing consistent perceptions about improvements and strategies to enhance the hostel.



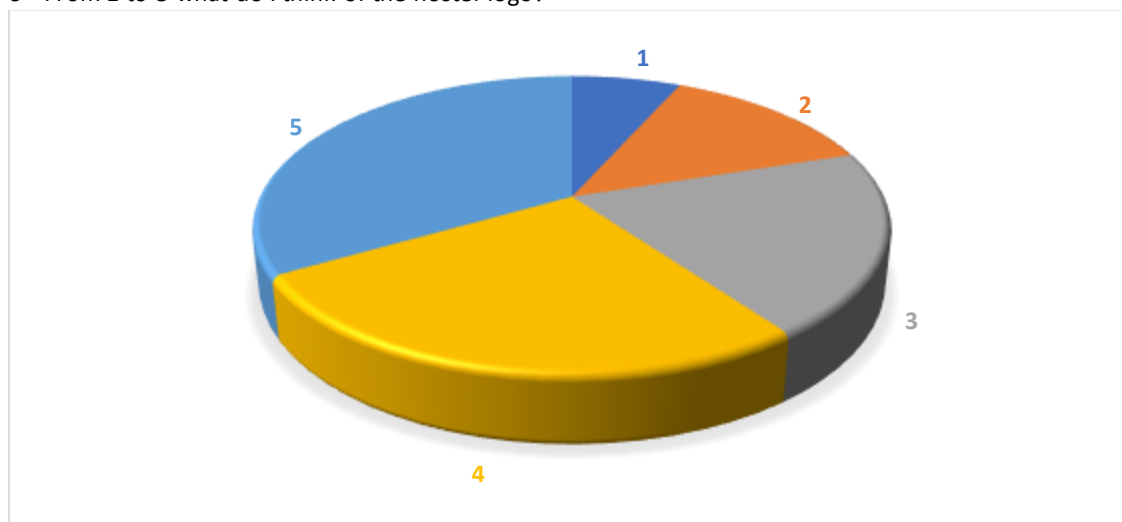
8- What could the hostel do to stand out on the Camino de Santiago route?



**Figure 8:** Suggestions for improvements to highlight on the Camino de Santiago route. (Source authors)

Most respondents responded that they would promote the hostel more on social media and websites; create an official hostel website and partner with other public hostels along the route to jointly achieve the same goal; and post more hostel posters along the route. According to Kapferer (1998), "A brand is at once a sign, a word, an object, and a concept. A sign, because a brand is multifaceted: it integrates figurative signs, such as logos, emblems, colors, shapes, packaging, and design. The word, in this case the brand name, is the medium for oral or written information about the product." In short, the hostel brand cannot be made invisible and needs to be managed both in its sign, logo, and its distinctiveness. When asked what pilgrims thought of the logo, on a scale of 0 to 5, the majority responded with a score of 5, and figure 9 with a score of 4.

9 - From 1 to 5 what do I think of the hostel logo?



**Figure 9:** Pilgrims' evaluation of the São Teotônio Municipal Hostel logo (Source authors)

See the relevance of the logo - brand - of the Albergue São Teotónio, which contains a visual graphic symbol, making reference to the Caminhos de São Tiago and in the name gives relevance to the location of the Albergue "Valença".



**Figure 10:** Brand - Taken from the official Facebook page of the São Teotónio Municipal Hostel (Source authors)

However, it's imperative to mention that the "Albergue S. Teotónio Valença" brand logo positively represents the hostel. However, it's not just the logo that represents the brand, but also the way it conveys to consumers the reason it exists, where it wants to go, what it values, and its impact on the journey, as it creates an emotional bond and promotes meanings that are connected to the reason for undertaking the journey or consuming a service. Therefore, all the results reinforce the importance of innovation in the hostel's structure. Regarding the hostel's communication with its audience, it maintains a positive image.

## 5. Conclusion – Final Considerations

This study seeks to highlight the relevance of this scientific study by demonstrating how brand management and digital communication can contribute to strengthening the São Teotónio Municipal Hostel within the context of religious and cultural tourism in Portugal. The results collected from 115 pilgrims allow us to conclude that, although the hostel is recognized for its social function and simple hospitality, the lack of consistent digital marketing and institutional communication strategies significantly limits its awareness. Therefore, measures such as creating an institutional website, strengthening its social media presence, and improving physical signage along the route are essential to strengthening the brand's identity, fostering greater connection with pilgrims, and increasing its competitiveness relative to other accommodation options, as mentioned above (Kotler & Keller, 2019; Sigala, 2020). Understanding how pilgrims themselves could contribute to this goal by answering questionnaires and interviewing the tourism manager in the hostel's location: Valença do Minho. Therefore, studying this topic was valuable, as tourism and marketing must work hand in hand.

Understanding how marketing can impact such a diverse tourism sector as the Camino de Santiago, how marketing is beneficial for generating a positive image among pilgrims of a municipal hostel, the city of Valencia, and analyzing how the hostel can impact the many people who pass through it. In light of this, there are some suggestions for improving this space, such as: posting more signs indicating accommodations along the Camino de Santiago route to improve mobility; creating an institutional website, linked to the municipality's official website, to establish a connection between pilgrims and the administration of these accommodations; and maintaining consistent Facebook posts to update the necessary information to facilitate accommodation, while ensuring pilgrims' safety during their journey. Considering that the municipality has its own brand and that the Camino de Santiago is also a well-established and recognized brand, it would be important to also strengthen the brand of the São Teotónio Municipal Hostel. Public hostels often end up forgotten in the digital world, precisely because of the prevailing idea that, because they are managed by public entities, they should not be publicized.

Despite the study's scientific and practical contributions, it is important to emphasize some methodological limitations. The sample, collected from pilgrims, is non-probabilistic and may not reflect the entire profile of

pilgrims who travel the Camino de Santiago. Furthermore, the study's temporal limitations hampered the possibility of a longitudinal analysis capable of measuring the impacts of improvement proposals over time. In short, future studies include monitoring pilgrims' experiences after the implementation of digital communication strategies, comparing brand management between public and private hostels, or evaluating the social and economic impacts of structured branding applied to public accommodations on the Camino de Santiago. Such developments could consolidate this contribution, expanding scientific knowledge on the relationship between digital marketing, religious tourism, and hospitality management in Portugal.

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