Spanish Startup Wins Billionaire Backing for 'Google of Images'

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Larry Page and Sergey Brin changed the world by figuring out a better way to search the Internet for text. Sira Perez de la Coba aims to do the same for images.

Sira Perez de la Coba, founder and chief executive officer of Shazura.

Ignacio Rengifo/Shazura/Bloomberg

While existing image-recognition technologies rely on text descriptions of pictures, the 37-year-old Spanish engineer has patented a way to compare millions of photos or videos with no previous text tagging to identify images of people, places, or items.

"I'm a totally visual person, my mind works with images," said Perez de la Coba, who in 2011 founded a Madrid company, now called Shazura, that makes the software. "I wanted to do for photos what Google did to search."

Her technology converts photos or videos to numbers and then combing through that data to compare them. It might be used for facial recognition, she said, or for identifying flora or fauna you encounter on a Sunday hike. For instance, if you snap a photo of oily-looking greenery at the trailside, the technology could tell you whether it's poison ivy or some more benign plant.

Perez de la Coba, has raised $1.1 million, and this summer expects to set up an office in Silicon Valley where she'll hire programmers to refine the technology. Billionaire Venezuelan media tycoon

Gustavo Cisneros, his daughter Adriana, former Warner Music Chairman Edgar Bronfman Jr., and Jordanian technology entrepreneur Walid Tahabsem are among Shazura's backers.

Green Shoes

The investors became attracted to Shazura after Perez de la Coba presented her idea to a panel put together by Endeavor Global Inc., a U.S. non-profit that links entrepreneurs with corporate mentors.

"I saw an opportunity of a very advanced and solid image-recognition technology that will rock and change the way we have been using the Internet," Tahabsem said in an e-mail.

Shazura doesn't intend to compete with search sites such as Google. Instead, it aims to supply the technology used by those kinds of services as well as online retailers, social networks - - any sites or apps with images.

Perez de la Coba, an electrical engineer who previously worked for security-technology provider Indra Sistemas SA, says she envisions advertisers benefiting from the technology. If you post a photo on Facebook with a Harley in it, the software could suggest that Honda or BMW show you an ad.

She has worked on an app used by Spanish department store El Corte Ingles SA and dozens of other retailers that lets shoppers find clothes and accessories that match other garments. A photo of your trousers, for instance, yields suggestions of coats and tops with similar patterns, colors, or fabrics -- an idea that was sparked when she wanted to find shoes that a friend had bought.

"Searching for 'green shoes' didn't work because when I took a picture I got all types of results and not the shoes she bought in New York," said Perez de la Coba. "Now, I want to start working on the technology for other stuff."