



Web Quality Index (WQI) for official tourist destination websites. Proposal for an assessment system



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ABSTRACT

Tourism is a vital economic activity in many countries. Cities, regions, countries and destinations of all categories vie for securing tourists and to do so they employ communication and promotion channels such as official websites. Despite the importance of these websites, no comprehensive method of assessment exists to enable communications managers and directors to find out whether their destination's website is effective and where it ranks in comparison to its competitors.

This paper presents a hitherto unseen assessment system aimed at meeting this need. Using a host of indicators, grouped into twelve parameters, a Web Quality Index (WQI) has been specifically established for tourist destination websites which, as well as determining an overall index, makes it possible to draw comparison between parameters or spheres of analysis.

The assessment system is illustrated using the result of a pilot sample of official websites from ten destinations to confirm the validity and potential of the model put forward.

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1. Introduction

Tourism is one of the key economic activities in many regions. According to data from the OECD, in 2008 tourism accounted for 10.7% of GDP in Spain, 10.5% in Portugal, 8.2% in Mexico, 5.5% in Austria, 3.7% in France and 2.6% in the USA (OCDE, 2010). Nations, countries, regions, cities and all manner of destinations vie to draw in tourists (in greater numbers or of greater quality where quality of the tourist refers to their purchasing power or spending capacity).

These destinations are backed by promotion bodies (commonly known by the abbreviation DMO – Destination Marketing Organisation – Blain, Levy, & Brent Ritchie, 2005; Gretzel, Fesenmaier, Formica, & O'Leary, 2006) from the public sector, the private sector or public–private partnerships and they invest large sums of money into promotion and communication actions in the mass media (television, radio, the press), on the Internet and via official promotion websites.

Specifically, the Internet has become the main channel on which tourists search for information (Lehto, Kim, & Morrison, 2006); therefore, destinations should benefit from an appealing, efficient official website in persuasive terms (Choi, Lehto, & O'Leary, 2007), and from a strategy whereby an active presence is ensured within the various

tools afforded by the social web (Hvass & Munar, 2012; Xiang & Gretzel, 2010).

Nowadays, most tourists from any part of the globe plan their holidays, make their bookings and service purchases, and share their experiences over the Internet. For instance, according to the Spanish Institute for Tourist Studies, (IET, 2010) “60% of tourists who visited Spain used the Internet as the tool for planning their holidays”.

Indeed, official websites serve as an essential tool for several aspects (Díaz-Luque, 2009; Fernández-Cavia & Huertas-Roig, 2009):

- for providing information to potential or current tourists who are looking to find out about places of interest, what's on, the destination location, ways of planning their journey, opening hours and prices for museums, attractions and tourist trails, accommodation, and so on;
- for destination branding, in other words, for conveying the values and basic features of the brand for the specific destination which in advertising and marketing terms is known as brand equity (Sartori, Mottironi, & Corigliano, 2012);
- as an instrument for persuading potential tourists;
- as a channel for marketing related services and products; and
- as a platform for sharing information and experiences among destination managers and tourists, or simply between tourists themselves.

These functions are essential upon unanimously acknowledging the profound changes that have taken place in the behaviour of today's

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consumers and travellers: the generalisation of communication technologies has given rise to a new type of tourist who is less interested in the traditional holiday packages, less accustomed to waiting or delays, more demanding and sophisticated and used to addressing the suppliers directly (Buhalis & Law, 2008: 611).

At present, every major tourist destination has an official website for branding purposes. However, is this site appealing to the user? Does it provide the tourist with the information required? Does it make the most of the full potential afforded by the Internet? Is it persuasive, convincing the tourist to visit the destination?

Despite the rapid evolution of digital communication, the quality and suitability of official destination websites is far from homogenous. As a result, it is important to benefit from a suitable assessment tool that can provide DMOs with guidelines and suggestions for improvement.

This paper sets out an original, hitherto unseen system for assessing official tourist destination websites. It consists of an integrated, interdisciplinary model combining quantitative and qualitative data in order to encompass all aspects that are of importance in any website.

1. Technical aspects such as usability and positioning.

Several studies have already made clear the importance of the ease of use for destination websites. Park and Gretzel (2007) established that 60% of papers referring to destination website effectiveness dealt with this attribute. Kim and Fesenmaier (2008) also found that “destination Web sites must be user-friendly so that information searchers can easily navigate sites with no (or a minimum level of) mental effort”. Besides that, a destination website must not only be easy to navigate but also easy to find, otherwise users using a search engine could end browsing non official sites. Web positioning, thus, becomes fundamental for DMOs and destination brands (Morrison, Taylor, & Douglas, 2004). Another technical aspect that must be assessed is the information architecture (Yeung & Law, 2004), that is, the way information is organized, structured and labelled in order to facilitate its retrieving.

2. Communicative aspects such as the amount and quality of content or language selection.

The same article mentioned before (Park & Gretzel, 2007) pointed out that information quality is the most prominently used concept in tourism website evaluation. Li and Wang (2010) explain that destination websites must provide accurate and timely information. But we have also included among these aspects the home page, analysed separately due to its importance – in fact, destination website homepages are the only unit of analysis of some other studies (Luna-Nevarez & Hyman, 2012) –, and the use of languages and cultural adaptations, so essential in the tourism sector.

3. Relational aspects such as interactivity or use of 2.0 tools.

Interactivity has been considered one of the most important features for brand websites (Macias, 2010). It helps users to process information, makes navigation to last longer and improves the attitudes toward the brand (Sicilia, Ruiz, & Munuera, 2005). Moreover, the new interactive platforms and channels of communication, known as social media play a major role in the selection of a tourist destination (Sigala, 2009; Xiang & Gretzel, 2010), so they have to be examined in detail. Finally, mobile marketing is expanding its influence, so every destination should be prepared for it, just offering mobile version of the website (Stienmetz, Levy, & Boo, 2012) or developing specific mobile applications (Fernández-Cavia & López, 2013).

4. Persuasive aspects such as brand image and options for marketing the products and services provided by the website.

Persuasion is a facet often underestimated when it comes to assessing commercial websites. The goal of an official destination's website is not only to inform about the place but also to convince potential tourists to visit it. The narrative use of text and pictures has been identified as crucial (Lee & Gretzel, 2012) as well as the creation of a strong brand image able to convey the differentiating features and distinctive offer of the place (Choi, Lehto, & Morrison, 2007). Users' first

impression has been analysed too and considered critical in the process of online information search (Kim & Fesenmaier, 2008). Last but not least a destination's website can be also conceived as a virtual point of sale where the user can browse, compare, book or buy tourism products and services (Buhalis, 2000). This function has been analysed in recent academic works under different labels such as “fulfilment” (Park & Gretzel, 2007) or “transaction” (Li & Wang, 2010).

To do so, with the cooperation of an extensive group of experts¹ specialising in the various fields of study, a template for analysis has been developed incorporating twelve parameters or topic areas, each with their own indicators. The aim of this paper is to provide a detailed overview of the methodology and illustrate some examples of results in order to demonstrate the potential afforded by the model.²

2. Methodology

2.1. Context

In the sphere of documentation science there is a long tradition of assessing documentary resources, initially in paper format and subsequently in digital format. The valuation and assessment of websites in these disciplines began during the 1990s. It was at that time that the early databases and directories were set up categorising resources available on the Internet according to quality. Some examples of such initiatives include the British directories BUBL and SOSIG and the Tecnociencia, Darwin and Cercador websites in Spain.

The choice of resources was essentially made according to content and authorship. By the end of the 1990s, assessment methods had to adapt to the new demands stemming from the preparation of audits and quality hallmarks on the Internet. The outcome was the incorporation of new sections to assess, specifically information architecture, usability, accessibility, visibility and, more recently, web positioning.

Moreover, the process was streamlined with a formalisation based on indicators, parameters and procedures (Codina, 2000). The result was a firm methodological tool that has been adapted and applied to a variety of differing websites, such as health sites (Louro González, 2001); scientific information websites (Aguillo, 2009); institutional repositories (Rovira, Marcos, & Codina, 2007; Vives i Gràcia, 2005); free web resources (Estivill & Abadal, 2000); database consultation interfaces (Abadal, 2002); e-magazines (Rodríguez-Gairín, 2001); digital newspaper libraries (Guallar & Abadal, 2009); museum websites (Badell & Rovira, 2010); city websites (Fenoll Clarabuch & Lluca Fonollosa, 2006; Moya Martínez, 2003; Rovira, Fernández-Cavia, Pedraza-Jiménez, & Huertas, 2010); free meta search engines (Sastre-Suárez & Pastor-Ramon, 2011) and web 2.0 (Rodríguez-Martínez, Codina, & Pedraza-Jiménez, 2012), to name a few examples.

With regard to tourism, research aimed at analysing the quality of websites began more than ten years ago, as detailed by Law, Qi, and Buhalis (2010). Nonetheless, as these authors mention, there is still no

¹ Specifically, during the initial stage (2009–2011) the group of experts was formed by the following researchers: Pablo Díaz-Luque, Assumpció Huertas, Cristófol Rovira, Jordi de San Eugenio, Lorena Gómez, María Isabel Míguez, María Sicilia, Mila Gascó, Rafael Pedraza, Samuel Martín-Barbero, Sebastián Bonilla, Teresa Torres, Víctor Cavaller and José Fernández-Cavia; during the second stage (2012–2014), relating to the current research project, the group of experts is formed by the following researchers: Pablo Díaz-Luque, Cristófol Rovira, Lorena Gómez, María Isabel Míguez, Rafael Pedraza, Víctor Cavaller, Carlos Scolari, Gloria Jiménez, Anna Pallerols, Sara Vinyals and José Fernández-Cavia.

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