

business to achieve a winning website and, in particular, for destination businesses. It is at this juncture that we shall address the issue.

With current web platform renewals for some websites, DMOs in Spain continually highlight the need perceived in the sector to improve the communicative skills offered by the Internet. At present, for DMOs the design, creation and maintenance of websites that inform about, promote and market their destination brands effectively is essential. However, most scientific and professional advances relating to the Internet tend to encounter delays in being transferred and applied to Spanish tourism destination brand websites.

Likewise, although research aimed at assessing the communicative effectiveness of tourism websites began more than ten years ago, as explained by Law, Qi & Buhalis (2010), in the field of tourism there is still no broadly accepted definition of what website assessment is and what it should consist of.

There are currently some techniques used by researchers to assess tourism websites. Law, Qi & Buhalis (2010) have reviewed the studies published between 1996 and 2009 and have identified five types:

1. Counting methods (entails assessing the performance of the website or determining the wealth of website content).
2. Automated methods (use of software systems).
3. Numerical computation methods (use of mathematical functions).
4. User judgment methods (assessment of user satisfaction and perceptions).
5. Combined methods (combination of the above methods).

According to these experts, all these methods bear significant merits to be taken into consideration; nevertheless, they also show gaps and limitations making it difficult to choose an ideal method. Consequently, based on the affirmations of other researchers, they venture for a combined assessment methodology which in their view will be the best capable to provide useful, satisfactory results for all interested public groups.

Said authors conclude the following:

The tourism industry at present does not have, but urgently needs, commonly agreed-upon website evaluation techniques that are repeatable and measurable and have a good potential for long-term use (Law, Qi y Buhalis, 2010: 14).

As a response to the problem we have detailed, we will consider our own methodology to analyse destination websites, an interdisciplinary, integrated model specific to the tourism sector combining automated analyses with qualitative and quantitative analyses.

4. The research project

The analysis methodology we are going to set out is part of the efforts conducted on the context of the research project “New strategies for advertising and promoting Spanish tourism brands online”, funded by the Spanish Ministry of Science and Innovation (CSO2008-02627), and supervised at Pompeu Fabra University in Barcelona. The project ran from 1 January 2009 to 31 December 2011.

The work team comprised thirteen researchers from seven Spanish universities specialising in a range of knowledge areas: advertising, public relations, tourism, economics, information architecture and usability, market research, linguistics and geography.

The main aim of the work was to diagnose and assess the quality and suitability of Spanish destination websites and provide DMO managers with the knowledge needed to incorporate the latest scientific and professional developments into their design.

The study seeks to serve as an essential instrument for improvement for local and autonomous community governments in Spain and for public companies linked to tourism. Said organisations will have the opportunity to take advantage of solid theoretical foundations from a range of communication perspectives in order to strengthen and promote their brands and, thus, increase the number of tourists in their territory.

On account of the nature of the object of study, it was necessary to use a combination of several research techniques providing the most comprehensive portrayal possible of the effectiveness of territory tourism brand websites. In order to assess the effectiveness of a website in a useful manner, we focus on three fundamental aspects involved in the communicative process: the issuer, the message and the recipient.

Study of the issuer

The aim of this area is to become acquainted with the structure and operation of Destination Marketing Organisations (DMOs) and their brand strategies and communication objectives.

For this section, two questionnaires have been put together intended for the managers in charge of communication from Spanish autonomous communities, cities and regions. The first, of a general nature, seeks to identify the various forms of organisation existing in the bodies responsible for territory brands as well as the various approaches adopted in terms of communication plan strategies and content, and the second, more particular in nature, focuses on the destination brand strategy and handling.

Only on the basis of this information will it then be possible to suitably assess the effectiveness of an official website.

Study of the message

The study of this area involves assessing the quality of the message produced in the guise of a website. To do so, two key instruments have been used: a website analysis template and an automated system for analysing positioning in search engines.

The analysis template has been developed by the research team based on several previous contributions. The template is organised into subject areas and every subject area is comprised by a variable number of indicators. The construction process of this template is the main contribution of this article.

The analysis of positioning strategies in search engines of various Spanish tourism destination websites is carried out using the specific DigiDocSpider software, a spider type computer programme that automatically analyses websites. It takes as the programme input a host of URLs (websites) and a series of indicators and parameters to analyse. The output is a report in which the level of compliance of these parameters and indicators is stated for each URL.

Study of the recipient

No communication process is complete without a recipient. In this section, the behaviour of tourists who are also Internet users is analysed. To do so, two instruments are used: a sociological survey and an experimental test.

The sociological survey is addressed to end users (tourists who have visited a destination in the past year) based on a sample of 500 people in order to conduct a study from the standpoint of reception and interpretation on the part of consumers.

The experimental test shall be carried out based on the modification of websites. The control group will be able to browse a destination website while the experimental group will be subject to browsing the same website but with indicators affecting several study variables having been altered in each case.

Project website

We use www.marcasturísticas.org in order to disseminate and set out the project. It is a website that focuses on setting out information on the research project and offering knowledge and fostering ties between academic researchers and professionals with expertise in promoting and communicating territory brands on the Internet.

5. Analysis template for the assessment of destination brand websites

5.1. General approach: teamwork and group of experts

Our working methodology seeks to turn to good account the areas of knowledge and expertise of all the members of the research project and draw up an analysis template as all-embracing as possible adapted to the tourism sector to achieve maximum effectiveness in assessing destination brand websites.

The teamwork was carried out using online cooperation tools and two face-to-face meetings deemed to be expert meetings.

During the first meeting (held in April 2009) a consensus was reached on the working methodology, the subject areas that would make up the analysis template and the glossary of concepts. The idea of putting together a joint glossary stemmed from the evidence that, according to their respective areas of knowledge, each of the experts had different ways of understanding the same terms. Accordingly, it was necessary to conduct a prior task of establishing a consensus on and pooling what would be the basic concepts that would be used in the project and what would be the approach to them on the scope of our research. For each of the terms chosen, the glossary set out an operative definition (brief and direct), an overall definition, and an expansion of the subject matter and a list of key bibliographical references on the issue.

In the second meeting (held in March 2010) the selection of indicators linked to each of the subject areas in the analysis template was addressed in greater depth. To do so, a number of workshops were held with two different groups. To attain a firm overview of the template in an interdisciplinary manner, each group was formed by a specialist member from each of the subject areas. Once the group workshop was concluded, the lead researcher supervised the pooling of proposals.

In order to finalise the details of the template and overcome the hurdle of distance, a wiki work format was chosen. Accordingly, all the experts were able to make consultations, provide contributions and engage in debate over a common platform with regard to the improvements considered.

This internal working methodology has helped us especially to detect and address overlaps or repetitions existing between indicators for differing subject areas and to achieve a template as comprehensive and operative as possible.

5.2. Subject areas and indicators

Following the idea of a specific methodology, we have developed our own template design for the analysis of destination brand websites based on a consensus reached by the entire work team. Furthermore, most of the recommendations for producing an excellent tourism website offered by the WTO/ETC in their *Handbook on E-Marketing for Tourism Destinations* (WTO, 2008) have also been available for consideration, along with the idea of establishing an interdisciplinary, all-embracing analysis as proposed by Law, Qi & Buhalis (2010).

The result of this line of work is demonstrated by the various subject areas of the analysis template which we will set out in greater detail below.

Each of the subject areas has specific indicators that cover the most important points of analysis. The template comprises a total of 154 indicators. Subsequently, for a more in-depth explanation, we will set out a brief definition of each of the subject areas, some of the aspects that will be dealt with for each of them and an example of an indicator:

Accessibility: accessibility refers to the host of strategies, recommendations and resources making a website accessible or not, taking into consideration people with visual and/or auditory impairments and access to website content through the use of devices with limited capacity, for instance, mobile telephones. In this section, aspects such as font size, font/background contrast, compatibility with different browsers and screen resolutions, plugging, alternative text labels and website suitability were all taken into consideration, among others. A total of seven indicators were considered.

Fig. 2. Example of indicator in the subject area Accessibility

<p>Alternative text labels</p> <p>Were the alternative text features “alt” and/or “title” and/or “summary” used in images, links and tables?</p> <p><u>Explanation:</u> the presence of these labels is highly positive as they describe to users with impairments or using devices with limited capacity the content appearing on the website that will be illegible to them (for instance, images in the case of blind people). In some browsers, to verify the presence of these features you only need to move the cursor over the images and tables in order for their descriptions to appear).</p>	<p>Yes/No (automated)</p>
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Source: Compiled by authors

Information architecture: information architecture refers to the art and science of structuring and classifying websites and intranets in order to help users find and handle information (Rosenfeld & Morville, 2002). This subject area addresses banners, structure and browsing, page layout and the internal website search application. A total of twelve indicators were considered.

Fig. 3. Example of indicator in the subject area Architecture

<p>User orientation in browsing</p> <p>Are there browsing elements that orient the user as to where he is and how to undo his browse?</p> <p><u>Explanation:</u> websites should present browsing elements normally in the form of breadcrumbs telling the user where on the website he is and enabling him to undo his search.</p>	<p>Yes/Partly/No</p>
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Source: Compiled by authors

Positioning: positioning refers to the process to improve the place held by the website in search engine results lists whether natural, organic or unremunerated, in an ethical manner. For this subject area we establish internal and external indicators that will assess the handling of keywords, that is, their choice, frequency and presence in various sections of the website (URL, links, titles, metadata, etc.); brightness; the quality of output links; the PageRank and the TrafficRank; and input links, among other aspects to be assessed. A total of seventeen indicators were considered.

Fig. 4. Example of indicator in the subject area Positioning

<p>External factors. Page indexing</p> <p>Do the main search engines index all the pages on our website?</p>	<p>Yes/No (automated)</p>
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Source: Compiled by authors

Content quality and quantity: in this section we examine the various types of content that should exist on tourism destination websites and the assessment of their quality and quantity. To do so, we evaluate general tourism information (location, how to get there, how to get around, the weather, etc.), commercial tourism information (bars, rent a car, etc.), specialised information (oenology, conferences, etc.) and institutional information (contact). A total of twenty-four indicators were considered.

Fig. 5. Example of indicator in the subject area Content quality and quantity

<p>General information. Events/what's on</p> <p>Explanation:</p>	<p>Good/Satisfactory/Poor</p>
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<p>Good: the website contains information about special events or highlights in the destination (conferences, trade fairs, popular festivals, etc.). It provides details about what’s on in terms of cultural events with detailed explanations, links to event websites, etc.</p> <p>Satisfactory: the website has a list of events without any explanation, in a highly dispersed manner.</p> <p>Poor: the website does not offer this information.</p>	
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Source: Compiled by authors

Interactivity: interactivity refers to a two-way communicative relationship with other individuals or with the information or message itself. For this subject area we looked into the various interactions taking place over the website: consumer-message, consumer-marketer, and consumer-consumer; the latter of which is related to WOM. A total of twenty indicators were considered.

Fig. 6. Example of indicator in the subject area Interactivity

<p>Consumer-marketer interaction</p> <p>Are surveys conducted to compile user opinions?</p>	Yes/No
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Source: Compiled by authors

Web 2.0 presence: this concept of “Web 2.0” which is also called “social web” is characterised by the social and communicative dimensions appearing on the Internet. Good examples of this are blogs, social networks, forums, wikis, and so on. For this subject area we address the presence or level of adoption of Web 2.0 (blog layout, accounts on social networks such as Flickr, YouTube, LinkedIn, Twitter, etc.), manager-user-content interaction from a participatory and socialisation standpoint, issues such as user customisation, cooperation, creation and recommendation, and the level of technological innovation of the website (Huertas, 2008). A total of ten indicators were considered.

Fig. 7. Example of indicator in the subject area Web 2.0 presence

<p>Technological innovation</p> <p>Is it possible to view the city via live webcams?</p>	Yes/No
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Source: Compiled by authors

Brand image handling: brand handling refers to the way in which the brand image is managed, in other words, the mental representation of the perceived features and benefits of the brand formed by users based on their communications as a whole. For this subject area we focus on the presence of brand values and targets, the handling of functional and emotional elements of the territory brand, the brand logo, and the role of the website’s images in representing the destination brand. A total of fourteen indicators were considered.

Fig. 8. Example of indicator in the subject area Brand image handling

<p>Brand logo</p> <p>Do the prevalent colours of the website fit in with the logo?</p>	<p>Yes/No</p>
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Source: Compiled by authors

Usability: usability refers to the user-friendliness of the website and whether it achieves the goals set in an effective, swift, pleasant, appealing error-free manner. To analyse this area, aspects such as the updating of the website, the suitability of the URL, the identity of the institution and the use of multimedia elements (image quality, icons or visual metaphors, etc.) were addressed. A total of eleven indicators were considered.

Fig. 9. Example of indicator in the subject area Usability

<p>Suitability of the URL</p> <p>Does it have a correct, clear and easy to remember URL? What about the URLs of its internal pages? Are they clear and permanent?</p> <p><u>Explanation:</u> A suitable URL will make it easy for a human user to interpret. For instance: http://www.hp.es/productos/impresoras</p>	<p>Good/Satisfactory/Poor</p>
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Source: Compiled by authors

Distribution and marketing: distribution and marketing refers to the various booking systems offered by different tourism service providers over websites. For this subject area we address the level of marketing used on the website examined taking into consideration a host of booking and payment systems (pertaining to the site, external or both) for accommodation, events and catering/restaurants. A total of eleven indicators were considered.

Fig. 10. Example of indicator in the subject area Distribution and marketing

<p>Accommodation booking system</p> <p>Does the website incorporate a system for searching for and booking accommodation?</p> <p><u>Explanation:</u> Yes: the website offers comprehensive information (name, telephone, link, images, location and characteristics; using search criteria) about accommodation companies – at least hotels – from the destination. Partly: the website offers basic information (name, telephone and address; in a list) about accommodation companies – at least hotels – from the destination. No: the website does not have information or conduct marketing for accommodation companies.</p>	<p>Yes/Partly/No</p>
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Source: Compiled by authors

Home pages: a home page refers to the web foundation from which all the content can be accessed by means of hyper-textual browsing. For this subject area the indicators established examine relevant

aspects of home pages, for instance, the use of introductory videos, a language option before browsing the website or whether it is a destination brand website in itself. A total of fourteen indicators were considered.

Fig. 11. Example of indicator in the subject area Home page

When on the tourist brand home page	Yes/No
Is the tourist brand website a section or micro site of the competent administration web page?	

Source: Compiled by authors

Languages: this subject area addresses language management on the website, in other words, the language versions on each of the joint official and non-official/foreign websites deemed important to an official Spanish destination tourism brand web page. Depending on how many languages it has, the website will have a specific numerical rating. This area is based on previous projects such as those by Díaz Luque, Guevara & Antón (2006). A total of six indicators were considered.

Fig. 12. Example of indicator in the subject area Languages

Foreign languages	Rating
English	35 points
German	20 points
French	17 points
Italian	6 points
(...)	(...)
Total:	x points

Source: Compiled by authors

Discourse, argumentative and rhetorical analysis (text and images): for this subject area a rhetorical, persuasive and qualitative analysis is conducted based on patent, immanent significant aspects from the various levels of textual and image-based depth of the website. The analysis is carried out by handling “possible realms”, a methodology particular to discourse, argumentative and rhetorical assessment of website text and images. A total of eight indicators seek to point out whether expressive language is verbal and/or visual, among other things.

Fig. 13. Example of indicator in the subject area Discourse, argumentative and rhetorical analysis

Does the page include the presence of possible negative realms?	Yes/No
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Source: Compiled by authors

5.3. Sample

In order to verify the reliability and applicability of the analysis template we envisaged the application of the study on an initial sample comprising thirteen national and international websites of varying types of territories. Specifically, the websites of five countries, an autonomous community, two province capitals, two country capitals, a county capital and two regions will be analysed. By way of example, some of the websites in the sample belong to New Zealand, Ireland, Florida, Amsterdam, Madrid, Barcelona and the Valencia Community, which are considered as particularly interesting as a reference to successful destinations.

Nonetheless, the definitive sample shall be comprised by:

- the 52 Spanish province capital websites;
- the 17 Spanish autonomous community websites;
- the official Spain brand website;
- 10 Spanish region websites; and
- 10 European capital websites, used as a control and reference group.

The complete template will be applied to all these websites. So there are no discrepancies between updates, the web pages in the sample were fully downloaded during November 2010. Accordingly, the sample could be analysed offline and the specific content of the website could be checked at will.

The analysis depth level for the 90 websites depends on each specific indicator and subject area and may be as follows:

- **H:** Analysis of Home page.
- **H+10+10:** Analysis of the Home page + 10 first level pages + 10 second level pages.
- **H+2+2:** Analysis of the Home page + 2 first level pages + 2 second level pages.
- **B:** Search on entire website.
- **H+B:** Analysis of the Home page + Search on website.

For instance, within the subject area “Architecture”, in the indicator for gauging the length of the page “Is scroll used?”, the Home page, two first level pages and two second level pages are analysed. On the other hand, to gauge the suitability of the title with regard to the content of the website, the indicator “Is the title of the pages correct?, has it been planned?” is used, and the assessment shall be carried out by analysing the Home page, ten first level pages and ten second level pages.

One example of a search of elements to be analysed via the website would be the indicator for the subject area “Web 2.0”: “Does the website have a blog? ¿Does it have a channel on a video hosting service website (such as YouTube)?”. As an example of an indicator that should only be analysed on the Home page we could take the indicator for the subject area “Home pages”, which asks: “Before entering the Home page, strictly speaking, is there a presentation or introductory video?”.

5.4. Dissemination of results

As results are obtained, the team seek to establish a guide of best practices for tourism destination communication managers and for experts devoted to the online tourism communication sector. The guide will use exemplary cases to set out a host of recommendations and suggestions to help incorporate improvements to Spanish tourism destination websites.

Likewise, as a result of our project, consideration was given to preparing a general ranking of the quality of websites for Spanish cities and specific rankings for each of the subject areas of analysis considered in the template. These results shall be made available to destination brand managers and other researchers via the official project website.

6. Conclusions

We at the research team have identified the need to improve the virtual presence of destination brands and the major challenge faced by Destination Marketing Organisations (DMOs) in developing successful websites. Added to this, there is a lack of a broadly accepted definition of what the assessment of tourism websites is and should involve.

In order to meet the need for a comprehensive, operative interdisciplinary instrument consideration has been given to the design of a specific assessment template of our own encompassing a range of subject areas combining automated, qualitative and quantitative analyses with a total of 154 indicators.

The purpose of this research project and the design of the interdisciplinary template is not solely to establish a website analysis methodology for tourism destinations, it is also intended to afford resources and online improvements to destinations in Spain for autonomous, provincial and city locations, as well as smaller places with fewer resources.

Any researcher with interest in the issue can contact the members of the project team and obtain additional information at the following address: www.marcasturísticas.org.

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