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Tourism and online communication: interactivity and social web in official destination websites

Abstract

Websites are an important communication tool in destination branding. This study analyses the relational nature of 87 official destination websites (ODWs) according to two parameters: interactivity, whose link to ODWs has been highlighted in several studies; and, the presence of the social web elements, increasingly necessary to achieve comprehensive, effective online communication, for instance blogs, microblogging platforms or social networks. The authors apply a methodology based on indicators from the Web Quality Index (WQI): a specific website analysis model for the tourism industry. The methodology provides a useful tool for examining and assessing how destination marketing organisations endow their websites with interactivity and connect them to the social media arena. The results show significant shortcomings in the websites for the aspects analysed, especially with regard to indicators linked to interactivity. Furthermore, the study suggests a series of measures that destination marketing organisations could adopt in order to remedy these shortcomings and optimise the relational aspects of their websites.

Keywords

Destination marketing organisations, official destination websites, interactivity, social web, communication

1. Introduction

Communicating destinations is currently a vital task for improving the economic and social development of cities, regions and nations as tourism has become an important part of the GDP in most countries around the world. A destination can be defined as "a geographical space in which a cluster of tourism resources exist" (Pike, 2012: 24), and promoting a destination among actual and potential visitors is one of the key roles of the Destination Marketing Organizations (DMOs).

To achieve this, official destination websites (ODWs) play an important part, as "tourists use them for trip planning and selecting destinations" (Morrison, 2013: 372). Thus, it seems crucial to assess the quality of the ODWs and especially to analyse how they actually engage with users.

1.1. *Destination brands and online communication*

In an ever more competitive world and in a drive to draw in travelers, tourist destinations have been looking into the suitability of resorting to destination branding. It involves processes akin to those used by traditional brands, such as market segmentation, positioning, consumer research, relations with stakeholders, brand architecture management or brand image design and implementation (Balakrishnan, 2009; WTO, 2009; Ekinci, Sirakaya-Turk & Preciado, 2013).

Destination branding could be defined as "a deliberate strategy aiming to identify and differentiate a tourist destination from its competitors" (Sartori, Mottironi & Corigliano, 2012: 328) and the organisations in charge of the process are the DMOs (Gretzel, Fesenmaier, Formica & O'Leary, 2006; Pike & Page, 2014). A DMO is "the organisation responsible for the marketing of an identifiable destination. This therefore excludes separate government departments that are responsible for planning and policy, and private sector umbrella organisations" (Pike, 2012: 31). The primary role of these organisations is "to act as the coordinating body for the many public and private sector organisations with an interest in tourism" (Pike, 2012: 101). These institutions are at the forefront of destination brand communication and creation processes and they use techniques typical of advertising and public relations (MacKay & Smith, 2005; L'Etang, Falkheimer & Lugo, 2007).

One of the key challenges facing DMOs involves developing official destination websites (ODWs) to provide users with suitable information in order to help build a destination brand and persuade potential tourists. The aim is for ODWs to be used as a channel for marketing products and services, and as platforms for sharing information and experiences with and among users (Choi, Lehto & Oleary, 2007; Míguez-González, 2011; Lee & Gretzel, 2012).The relevance of the website as an element for tourism communication encouraged researchers to consider which elements a website would need to incorporate in order to be deemed a quality tool in this context and, accordingly, which possible formulae and methodologies could be used to determine whether the websites fulfil the objectives for which they have been set up (Park & Gretzel, 2007; Luna-Nevarez & Hyman, 2012; Dickinger & Stangl, 2013; Bastida & Huan, 2014).

From this standpoint, a group of researchers developed an assessment model that made it possible to analyse tourist destination websites from a range of perspectives in order to gain an overview of their quality. Thus, a web quality index would be obtained for creating rankings and comparing certain pages with others (Fernández-Cavia, Díaz-Luque, Huertas, Rovira, Pedraza-Jiménez, Sicilia, Gómez & Míguez-González, 2013; Fernández-Cavia, Rovira, Díaz-Luque & Cavaller, 2014). This analytical model has been developed taking into account the recommendations of the WTO and the ETC (2008), as well as the various web assessment methods that have been produced in this field, as summed up by Law, Qi and Buhalis (2010).

The result is an analysis methodology that assesses technical, communicative, persuasive and relational aspects of the website. The latter area also includes how the website uses interactive elements and applications linked to the social web. These interactive elements characteristic of the social web will be addressed in detail in this research paper.

1.2. *Interactivity on websites*

Interactivity can be defined as the potentiality of a technological system to promote efficient communication processes, allowing the presence of elements that make communication mediated by technology analogous to dialogue (Sádaba Chalezquer, 2000: 148). More recently, it has been defined as "the state or process of communicating, exchanging,

obtaining and/or modifying content (e.g., ideas, entertainment, product information) and/or its form with or through a medium (e.g., computer, modem, etc.) which responds to both the communicator's and the audience's communication needs by including hypertext links, reciprocal communication and so on." (Macias, 2010: 37). Several studies have looked into the relevance of interactivity of websites and have sought mechanisms to gauge it.

The articles by McMilland and Hwang (2002) and Liu (2003) incorporate scales to gauge the interactivity of a website and, with similar aims, Cho and Cheon (2005) analyse interactivity in a host of websites applying 25 indicators linked to three areas of interactivity: interactivity between user and message, shown in the way users can customise or adapt the website's content according to their interests; interactivity between user and administrator (understood, in this case, as the DMO), through mechanisms allowing the user to appeal directly to the organisation or mechanisms that allow the organisation to obtain user information; and user-user interactivity, reflected in tools such as forums or virtual communities, allowing users to engage in conversations and provide information to one another.

Sicilia, Ruiz and Munuera (2005) demonstrate that interactivity fosters the processing of a website's information and the more interactive a website is, the more encouraged the addressees of the product, service or brand promoted on it will be. Likewise, Huertas, Rovira and Fernández-Cavia (2011) conclude that city websites have greater scope for success if they include interactive elements such as chats or virtual communities. And, more recently, Oh and Sundar (2015) have explored the mechanisms by which the interactivity of a website enhances the persuasive potential of messages.

According to the recommendations of the WTO and the ECT (2008), interactivity is one of the foremost aspects in producing a successful tourism website. In this respect, certain authors (Luna-Nevarez & Hyman, 2012) include interactivity as a variable for analysing the quality or suitability of destination websites. Li and Wang (2010) developed an analysis model which illustrated the fact that the relationship component was vital. Indeed, they included the potential for customisation of the website, handling of complaints, virtual tours and customer loyalty programmes as significant.

It is important to note that in a meta-analysis based on 153 academic articles linked to website assessment, Park and Gretzel (2007) identify interactivity as one of the foremost factors that was present as a variable in 39% of the papers examined in the field of research into tourism and in 45% of papers in fields unrelated to tourism. Buhalis and Wagner (2013: 122) point out that "there is a general gap considering the implementation of interactive technologies within the destinations' web presence" in their benchmark analysis of 30 destination websites. Accordingly, in this article we raise the following research question:

RQ$_1$: Taking as reference the areas of interactivity proposed by Cho and Cheon (2005), what degree of interactivity do official destination websites show between user and message, between user and administrator and between different users?

1.3. *The social web and destination brand communication*

Tourist destination websites should not be isolated pages where the DMO solely posts information and allows for a degree of interaction with users. ODWs need to be windows open to other platforms and tools in the sphere of social media, which the user currently employs on a regular basis for searching information or when planning trips (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010).

In a review of literature published between 2007 and 2011 on the use of social media in the sphere of tourism, Leung, Law, van Hoof and Buhalis (2013) identify the use of these 2.0 tools as one of the megatrends that has had a major impact on the tourism system in recent years, not merely as sources of information prior to travel, but also owing to the potential

for use during and after trips. Under the concept of social media and web 2.0 tools, they classify platforms such as blogs and microblogs (Twitter), online communities (Facebook, TripAdvisor), media sharing sites (Flickr, YouTube), social bookmarking sites (Delicious) and social knowledge sharing sites (Wikitravel) (Leung, Law, van Hoof and Buhalis, 2013: 4).

Sigala (2009) and Xiang and Gretzel (2010) also agree that the social media play a significant role in the choice of destinations made by tourists. Nonetheless, other studies (Ayer, Au & Law, 2013; Cox, Burgess, Sellitto & Buultjens, 2009; World Travel Market, 2010) suggest that most Internet users do not make use of consumer-generated media to organise their holidays. In this respect, Jacobssen and Munar (2012) point out that other traditional sources are still a priority, even if social web tools have become a supplementary source of information for tourists.

Regardless of how extended their use is, one of the essential characteristics of these media is their ability to host and promote user-generated content (UCG) (Munar, 2011). This information affords a significant degree of credibility and tends to be perceived as more reliable than that offered by commercial or institutional sources (Murphy, Moscardo & Benckendorff, 2007; Litvin, Goldsmith & Pan, 2008; Leung *et al.*, 2013). Therefore, it has a bearing on the image users create in their minds about a specific destination (Munar, 2011), even if the image does not necessarily match the one the DMO seeks to conjure up (Lim, Chung & Weaver, 2012).

Thus, DMOs must consider and monitor the content generated on social media in relation to the media outlets in question whilst reaping the benefits afforded by web 2.0 tools for the brands they are promoting. However, Hvass and Munar (2012) indicate that, although social media encourage direct interaction with customers and monitor their opinions, their use often lacks a suitable strategy in terms of approach for a number of reasons including the poor level of integration between the various social media platforms.

In this regard, this underlines the view that an ODW can become a major cohesive element if it enables the user to access the various tools and functionalities of the social web in relation to the destination, whilst also providing access to social networks and external recommendation networks. However, an analysis of the use and integration of the social media by official destination websites has only been carried out in part to date, examining the homepage without comparing destinations (Luna-Nevarez & Hyman, 2012). As a result, we have raised the following research question:

RQ$_2$: Are the social media used by DMOs integrated into official destination websites?

2. Method

Based on these references, and partly applying the analysis model introduced by Fernández-Cavia *et al.* (2014), the main goal of this research is to assess Spanish tourist destination websites from a relational standpoint. To do so, the study focuses on the degree of interactivity and the presence of the social web tools. A comparison is then made of these results with those from other international benchmark destinations.

The sample of national destinations used for this study comprises 51 of the 52 Spanish province capital cities (Ávila did not have a website at the time of the analysis), the 17 Spanish autonomous communities and the website for Spain as a country brand. In order to compare the practices of national destinations with certain international ones, the study was supplemented with an analysis of nine country brand websites, in addition to Spain's, and the websites of nine international benchmark cities. The data were compiled over a two-month period between 21 March and 20 May 2013.

Using as a basis the analysis model introduced by Fernández-Cavia *et al.* (2014), in relation to an analysis of interactivity (I), 12 indicators, linked to the three forms of interaction identified by Cho and Cheon (2005), have been examined. User-message

interaction is illustrated by the presence of six elements in the websites (I1-I6); user–user interaction may be illustrated by the existence of two elements (I7-I8); the analysis of interactivity concludes with aspects relating to user–administrator interaction (I9-I12):

- I1: Multimedia display of the destinations via virtual tours or webcams.
- I2: Multimedia display of the destinations via interactive or no interactive videos. This element, along with the previous one, constitutes one of the aspects that most clearly contributes to bringing a potential tourist closer to the destination for which information is being sought.
- I3: Information such as tourist leaflets, maps and guided tours the tourist can download free of charge to help plan a trip or become better acquainted with the potential destination beforehand.
- I4: Mobile application download options. For tourists, it is increasingly important to be able to download mobile applications to access the information they require at any time and from any place.
- I5: Interactive resources users may value in a positive light, such as interactive maps, games or online music, television channels, podcasts or listening applications.
- I6: Trip planner, enabling tourists to incorporate their own information or, at the very least, allowing them to use information on the website.
- I7: Clubs, communities or groups of users from the destination who may or may not be directly present on the website.
- I8: Stories, experiences or travel summaries from users.
- I9: Potential to comment on textual, photographic and video content created by the DMO.
- I10: Potential for users to vote on content.
- I11: Scope for user-generated content such as text, news, articles, photographs or videos to be published on the website.
- I12: Chat line or human click. This is a chat with a character that represents the web itself and that helps user to orientate in the search of content.

According to the weighted average of the results obtained for these indicators, an interactivity index of between 0 and 1 point is established for each destination, where 1 indicates an optimal level of interactivity.

In relation to presence of web 2.0 or the social web (SW), in this study the analysis was reduced to eight indicators linked to the use, tools and functionalities of the social web (SW1-SW6) and the use of social networks and external recommendation networks (SW7-SW8):

- SW1: Website allows for user-subscription to content syndication services.
- SW2: Website allows users to share information they deem of interest using 2.0 tools.
- SW3: Destination has a corporate blog associated with the web domain.
- SW4: Destination uses microblogging platforms.
- SW5: Website uses image platforms like Flickr, Picassa or Instagram.
- SW6: Website uses video platforms like YouTube.
- SW7: Destination has a Facebook page associated with the web domain.
- SW8: Website uses external recommendation social networks like Tripadvisor, allowing users to find information and opinions from a host of sources in the same place in a short space of time.

As is the case with interactivity, by adding the weightings of these indicators, an index of presence in the social web of between 0 and 1 point is obtained.

The websites in the sample were rated and assessed by two previously trained analysts. Interrater reliability for Cohen's Kappa index presented a 0.76 value.

3. Results

3.1. *Interactivity of official destination websites*

Table 1. Interactivity. Ranking of average score by destination and type of destination

DESTINATION	TYPE	SCORE	DESTINATION	TYPE	SCORE
1. Valencia Community	AC	0.70	24. Palma de Mallorca	SC	0.17
2. Vienna	IC	0.62	25. Cáceres	SC	0.16
3. London	IC	0.52	25. Ciudad Real	SC	0.16
4. Hong Kong	IC	0.51	25. Lleida	SC	0.16
4. Santiago de Compostela	SC	0.51	25. Madrid	SC	0.16
5. Granada	SC	0.48	25. Castellón de la Plana	SC	0.16
6. Valencia	SC	0.47	25. Las Palmas de Gran Canaria	SC	0.16
7. Cantabria	AC	0.44	25. Tarragona	SC	0.16
8. Badajoz	SC	0.43	25. Seville	SC	0.16
9. Canary Islands	AC	0.38	25. Spain	C	0.16
10. Galicia	AC	0.36	26. Navarre	AC	0.15
10. Castile-La Mancha	AC	0.36	26. Australia	C	0.15
11. Segovia	SC	0.35	27. Orense	SC	0.14
11. Thailand	C	0.35	27. Toledo	SC	0.14
12. Catalonia	AC	0.33	27. Almería	SC	0.14
12. Sydney	IC	0.33	27. USA	C	0.14
12. Barcelona	SC	0.33	28. Extremadura	AC	0.12
13. Andalusia	AC	0.32	28. Castile and Leon	AC	0.12
13. Paris	IC	0.32	28. Zamora	SC	0.12
13. Berlin	IC	0.32	28. Cádiz	SC	0.12
13. Salamanca	SC	0.32	28. Germany	C	0.12
14. Pamplona	SC	0.31	29. Bangkok	IC	0.11
15. New York	IC	0.28	29. Zaragoza	SC	0.11
15. Valladolid	SC	0.28	30. Balearic Islands	AC	0.10
16. Huesca	SC	0.27	30. Rome	IC	0.10
16. Girona	SC	0.27	30. Huelva	SC	0.10
16. France	C	0.27	31. Lugo	SC	0.09
17. Madrid Community	AC	0.26	31. León	SC	0.09
17. Austria	C	0.26	31. La Coruña	SC	0.09
18. La Rioja	AC	0.25	32. Oviedo	SC	0.07
18. Basque Country	AC	0.25	33. Albacete	SC	0.05
19. Vitoria	SC	0.23	33.Guadalajara	SC	0.05
19. Málaga	SC	0.23	33. Burgos	SC	0.05
20. Asturias	AC	0.22	33. Jaén	SC	0.05
21. Santa Cruz de Tenerife	SC	0.21	33. Palencia	SC	0.05
21. San Sebastián	SC	0.21	33. Santander	SC	0.05
22. Cuenca	SC	0.20	33. Mérida	SC	0.05
22. Córdoba	SC	0.20	33. Murcia	SC	0.05
22. Italy	C	0.20	34. Bilbao/Bilbo	SC	0.04
23. Pontevedra	SC	0.19	34. Soria	SC	0.04
23. United Kingdom	C	0.19	34. China	C	0.04
24. Aragon	AC	0.17	35. Teruel	SC	0.00
24. Murcia Region	AC	0.17	35. Logroño	SC	0.00
24. Alicante	SC	0.17			

IC AVERAGE		0.35	AC AVERAGE		0.28
C AVERAGE		0.19	SC AVERAGE		0.17
TOTAL SAMPLE AVERAGE		**0.21**			

IC = International city / SC = Spanish city / AC = Autonomous community / C = Country

The average interactivity index for all the destinations analysed is well below 0.5, which would indicate an average level. International cities showed the best results, but these figures are highly discrete for all types of destination, particularly taking into consideration that the maximum scores achieved were 0.7 points. Most destinations obtained a rating below a level deemed acceptable (the average of 0.5), and almost one quarter achieved a score of below or equal to 0.1, meaning that the degree to which they use various tools and mechanisms allowing the website to be interactive is negligible. In short, interactivity is a poorly-addressed aspect on most ODWs analysed, although major differences do exist depending on the kind of interactivity in question.

Table 2. User-message interaction

		International cities	Spanish cities	Autonomous communities	Countries
I1. Multimedia display	Without multimedia display	33.3%	74.5%	76.5%	90%
	Static camera	22.2%	13.7%	17.6%	10%
	Virtual tour	45.5%	11.8%	5.9%	0%
I2. Video	No video	55.6%	70.6%	47%	40%
	Outsourced videos	11.1%	21.6%	11.8%	40%
	Integrated video	22.2%	7.8%	29.4%	20%
	Integrated interactive video	11.1%	0%	11.8%	0%
I3. Downloads	No downloads	11%	16%	18%	80%
	Few downloads or payment downloads	45.5%	57%	29%	10%
	Free downloads	45.5%	27%	53%	10%
I4. Mobile applications	No downloads	33.3%	80.4%	53%	80%
	Free downloads	66.7%	19.6%	47%	20%
I5. Interactive resources	0-1	33.3%	58.8%	23.5%	60%
	2-4	44.5%	39.2%	76.5%	40%
	>4	22.2%	2%	0%	0%
I6. Trip planner	No	44.5%	72.6%	47.2%	70%
	Itinerary	11.1%	13.7%	23.5%	20%
	Trip planner with information from the web	22.2%	13.7%	23.5%	0%
	Trip planner with user information	22.2%	0%	5.8%	10%

By analysing the results of indicators linked to user-message interaction in depth (Table 2), it is observed that the results are quite satisfactory, albeit with scope for improvement in several aspects reviewed. For example, most Spanish destinations do not allow for a multimedia display of the destination via virtual tours or webcams. In certain cases, the website includes images from still cameras but few destinations allow the user to go on a virtual tour to permit interactivity and provide information on monuments. The data show scope for improvement when compared to international cities, although they are positive compared with country websites. Likewise, most websites do not have official promotional videos of the destination which can easily be identified on the homepage, nor do they have links to videos hosted on other platforms. Indeed, only two Spanish autonomous communities and one international city provide integrated videos with interactive options on their websites. However, most ODWs analysed offer the user a reasonable volume of free information and, in some cases, information requiring payment. This is not the case for country websites, most of which do not offer free downloads. Even so, certain elements such as road maps or the occasional general guide with information

about the country could be of use. The offer of alternative interactive resources is also a pending issue for most of the ODWs, although autonomous community websites are much more enhanced in this regard. Lastly, few websites from each of the types of destinations examined include a trip planner. Some websites make up for this shortcoming by offering trails prepared by the actual DMO, but most Spanish cities analysed and many autonomous communities do not possess any such tool.

User–user interaction (Table 3) is highly limited on most of the ODWs reviewed. Destinations that have user communities tend solely to incorporate the occasional external group, such as a Facebook group, and few choose to include a window on the website allowing users direct access to these groups. However, most Spanish destinations have no community, club or group for users at all. At this juncture, it is worth mentioning that, although lacking in other aspects of interactivity, country websites do show above average results for this indicator. Most destination websites do not provide stories, experiences or travel summaries from users. In some cases, this type of content can be accessed through external hosts such as Facebook, microsites and other official websites or by registering on the actual ODW. Only 8% of destinations include such content from users within the information provided on their websites. In short, the data appear to reflect a degree of fear among destinations in allowing users to interact with one another and share opinions that condition the location's image.

Table 3. User-user interaction

	User club / community / group				Stories, experiences or travel summaries		
	None	Outsourced	Facebook window	Integrated	None	Outsourced	Integrated
International cities	44.5%	11%	44.5%	0%	66.7%	11.1%	22.2%
Spanish cities	60.8%	25.5%	11.8%	1.9%	88.2%	7.9%	3.9%
Autonomous communities	70.6%	17.6%	5.9%	5.9%	76.5%	17.6%	5.9%
Countries	10%	60%	30%	0%	40%	40%	20%

User–administrator interaction (Table 4) is also lacking on the websites for most of the destinations reviewed, even though there are a number of tools that allow for this interaction to be easily improved. Only 10 websites allow users to comment on textual, photographic and video content created by the DMO. Similarly, only eight websites permit users to vote on content and only five destinations allow for user–generated content to be published on the website. Lastly, merely two cities have a chat line or human click. In other words, DMOs show no interest in allowing users to be heard on the websites reviewed.

Table 4. User-administrator interaction

	User comments		User votes		Content publication		Chat line or human link	
	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes
International cities	100%	0%	88.9%	11.1%	100%	0%	88.9%	11.1%
Spanish cities	88.2%	11.8%	92.2%	7.8%	96.1%	3.9%	98%	2%
Autonomous communities	76.5%	23.5%	82.4%	17.6%	88.2%	11.8%	100%	0%
Countries	100%	0%	100%	0%	90%	10%	10%	0%

3.2. *Presence of the social web on ODWs*

The development of certain social web tools such as social networks and microblogging platforms is more recent than most of the interactivity mechanisms mentioned previously. Regardless, the average obtained for the social web was 0.42, twice the index obtained for interactivity. In this regard, Spanish autonomous communities are the only types of destinations that rate well above the acceptable line.

Table 5. Social web. Ranking of average score by destination and type of destination

DESTINATION	TYPE	SCORE	DESTINATION	TYPE	SCORE
1. London	IC	0.87	12. Vitoria	CN	0.46
2. Santiago de Compostela	SC	0.85	12. Pontevedra	CN	0.46
3. Zaragoza	SC	0.8	12. Madrid	CN	0.46
4. Madrid Community	AC	0.74	12. Rome	CI	0.46
5. Valencia Community	AC	0.67	13. Orense	CN	0.41
5. Valencia	SC	0.67	14. Pamplona	CN	0.39
5. Castile-La Mancha	AC	0.67	14. New York	CI	0.39
5. France	C	0.67	14. Valladolid	CN	0.39
5. Córdoba	SC	0.67	14. Austria	P	0.39
5. Seville	SC	0.67	14. Santa Cruz de Tenerife	CN	0.39
6. Berlin	IC	0.65	14. Spain	C	0.39
7. Granada	SC	0.61	15. Asturias	CA	0.33
7. Segovia	SC	0.61	15. Alicante	CN	0.33
7. Salamanca	SC	0.61	15. Ciudad Real	CN	0.33
7. Girona	SC	0.61	15. Lleida	CN	0.33
7. Basque Country	AC	0.61	15. USA	P	0.33
7. Málaga	SC	0.61	15. Castile and Leon	AC	0.33
7. San Sebastián	SC	0.61	15. Zamora	SC	0.33
7. Murcia Region	AC	0.61	15. Bangkok	IC	0.33
7. Palma de Mallorca	SC	0.61	15. Oviedo	SC	0.33
7. Almería	SC	0.61	15. Murcia	SC	0.33
7. Balearic Islands	AC	0.61	15. Soria	SC	0.33
8. Canary Islands	AC	0.59	16. Mérida	SC	0.28
8. United Kingdom	C	0.59	17. Cuenca	SC	0.26
8. Navarre	AC	0.59	17. Australia	C	0.26
8. Cádiz	SC	0.59	17. Logroño	SC	0.26
9. Galicia	AC	0.54	18. Badajoz	SC	0.2
9. Thailand	C	0.54	18. Paris	IC	0.2
9. Catalonia	AC	0.54	18. Bilbao/Bilbo	SC	0.2
9. Aragón	AC	0.54	19. Germany	C	0.13
9. Las Palmas de Gran Canaria	SC	0.54	19. León	SC	0.13
9. Tarragona	SC	0.54	19. Santander	SC	0.13
9. La Coruña	SC	0.54	20. China	C	0.09
10. Hong Kong	IC	0.52	21. Lugo	SC	0.07
11. Cantabria	AC	0.48	21. Burgos	SC	0.07
11. Sydney	IC	0.48	21. Jaén	SC	0.07
11. Andalusia	AC	0.48	21. Palencia	SC	0.07
11. La Rioja	AC	0.48	22. Cáceres	SC	0
11. Italy	C	0.48	22. Extremadura	AC	0
11. Castellón de la Plana	SC	0.48	22. Huelva	SC	0
11. Toledo	SC	0.48	22. Albacete	SC	0
12. Vienna	IC	0.46	22. Guadalajara	SC	0
12. Barcelona	SC	0.46	22. Teruel	SC	0
12. Huesca	SC	0.46			
AC AVERAGE		0.52	IC AVERAGE		0.48
C AVERAGE		0.39	SC AVERAGE		0.38
TOTAL SAMPLE AVERAGE	**0.42**				

IC = International city / SC = Spanish city / AC = Autonomous community / C = Country

If we look at the overall ranking of scores, we can see that after London, the following six destinations with the best score are Spanish. However, as has been the case with interactivity, the lowest scores also mostly pertain to Spanish destinations. In all, almost 40% of the destinations analysed score 0.5 points or higher (Table 5).

Given the in-depth analysis of indicators (Table 6), we can observe that more than half of Spanish city and autonomous community websites allow for user-subscription to content syndication services. Some of them also allow users to choose the theme or channel. The data are clearly positive if we take into account the results of international cities. Likewise, most websites allow users to share information of their interest using 2.0 tools. The results obtained for these indicators show a clear interest on the part of DMOs to multiply the potential for disseminating information they deem of interest.

Table 6. Social web indicators

		International cities	Spanish cities	Autonomous communities	Countries
SW1. Content syndication services	No	77.8%	41.2%	47.1%	50%
	Partial	11.1%	49%	17.6%	30%
	Yes	11.1%	9.8%	35.3%	20%
SW2. 2.0 web tools to share information	0	11.1%	23.6%	5.9%	10%
	1	0%	0%	0%	10%
	2-3	33.3%	43.1%	11.8%	40%
	4 or more	55.6%	33.3%	82.3%	40%
SW3. Corporate Blog	No	44.4%	86.3%	58.8%	90%
	Yes	55.6%	13.7%	41.2%	10%
SW4. Microblogging platforms	No	0%	31.4%	11.8%	30%
	Icon	66.7%	58.8%	88.2%	60%
	Window	33.3%	9.8%	0%	10%
SW5. External image platforms	No	77.8%	62.7%	29.4%	60%
	Yes	22.2%	37.3%	70.6%	40%
SW6. Video platforms	No	11.1%	41.2%	11.8%	40%
	Icon	66.7%	45.1%	88.2%	60%
	Window	22.2%	13.7%	0%	0%
SW7. Facebook	No	0%	25.5%	11.8%	10%
	Icon	66.7%	60.8%	82.4%	80%
	Window	33.3%	13.7%	5.9%	10%
SW8.External recommendation network	No	88.9%	68.6%	76.5%	90%
	Icon	11.1%	31.4%	17.6%	10%
	Window	0%	0%	5.9%	0%

Furthermore, it is uncommon for destinations to include a corporate blog associated with the web domain. The lack of use of this tool may be down to the effort required to keep content in a blog up-to-date when there are other tools that allow content to be disseminated plainly and more swiftly. Along these lines, many destinations opt to use a microblogging platform (Twitter), either via an icon on the website or an open window allowing for direct participation on the platform, although use of this formula, far more interesting and convenient for users, is not common.

With respect to the use of image or video platforms, those specialising in the publication of photographs is uncommon. The use of video platforms on external hosting services is more frequent, either via an icon on the website (in most cases) or a window displaying the content, a mechanism only used for certain cities.

Concerning the use of social networks, Facebook is highly used for all types of destinations, in all likelihood due to the awareness on the part of website promoters as to the widespread use of Facebook among the general public. Nonetheless, it is not so common for users to access this social network via an open window directly on the ODW and, in general, they are only able to do so with an icon. Unlike Facebook, the use of external social recommendation networks is not common for any destination, although Spanish destinations do stand out in this regard.

4. Discussion

The low degree of interactivity found in the websites analysed matches the results of previous studies. For instance, Huertas, Rovira and Fernández-Cavia (2011) conclude that city websites widely used mechanisms to promote interactivity between user and message instead of interactivity between user and user or interactivity between user and administration. In addition, the study conducted by Luna-Nevarez and Hyman (2012) on 262 city websites shows that only 9.9% were deemed to have a high level of interactivity.

As for the potential to conduct a virtual tour of the destination, the study by Buhalis and Wagner(2013)shows that only1 of the 30 websites examined allowed for this; whereas, in this study, the percentage is substantially greater for international cities (45%) and Spanish cities (12%). Even so, based on such data, Buhalis and Wagner (2013: 123) state that "interactivity is another factor in the benchmark that the majority of destinations have neglected". The results of this research suggest that interactivity is an aspect that has barely been touched upon by official destination websites, albeit not an entirely neglected area.

In this respect, what could be the reasons behind the lack of interactivity of official destination websites? Obviously, technical issues are not to blame. There is a risk entailed by handing over the floor to users in an institutional communication sphere. Thus, it could be stated that there is the intent to use new communication instruments, but the new philosophy is not welcomed: handing over the floor regarding the brand – whether commercial, corporate or tourist-based – to consumers, users and audiences.

For this reason also, while unsatisfactory the results concerning the presence of social web elements are better than those for interactivity: in the case of social networks, opinion sharing takes place outside the context of the official destination website. Accordingly, it would appear that DMOs have overcome what Munar (2011: 299) defines as a "mimetic strategy", whereby destinations attempt to reproduce the style and culture of social networking sites on their own websites. This study coincides with the study conducted by Luna-Nevarez and Hyman (2012: 104) in noting that Facebook and Twitter are the foremost social networks present on destination websites and there is also common use made of the videosharing platform YouTube. On the other hand, less common use is made of blogs.

As Li and Wang (2010: 545) state, despite the fact that in theory "building long-term relationships with customers through website marketing is one of the most important functions of a DMO", this research coincides with their study in observing that the establishment of these relationships does not actually take place on the ODW but instead tends to be extrapolated to the social media available.

5. Conclusions and implications

This research analysed 87 ODWs taking into account interactivity and the presence of social web elements. To do so, the methodology used was based on the Web Quality Index: an

overall analysis model for tourism websites as introduced by Fernández-Cavia *et al.* (2014). With regard to interactivity, substantial shortcomings are observed for all types of destinations and in all of the interaction categories assessed. User-message interaction is the most developed aspect, although countries and Spanish cities need to advance in offering a range of tools to encourage users to become acquainted with the destination and organise their journey. Trip planners, mobile applications and multimedia display elements for the destinations are just some priority elements all websites should include to improve this area of interaction. In terms of user-user interaction, many experts point to the importance of *word of mouth* (WOM) as a mechanism for conveying information users deem reliable, but this is scant in the case of most destinations. Destinations are advised to take full advantage of the possibilities of established social media platforms if setting up their own virtual community proves to be costly and inefficient.

Storytelling from users should also be fostered by allowing a forum where experiences can be shared. User-administrator interaction is also poor in most of the destinations analysed as few websites offer the basic service of making comments on or voting for content. In short, this analysis shows there is little interest among DMOs in providing users with mechanisms to interact with one another, to give opinions or to share information with other users.

Concerning the presence of social web elements, the results are not so poor, but the average score is still unsatisfactory. Generally, destinations have shown a palpable interest in allowing users to employ the most common social media and tools like Twitter, Facebook or platforms for videos. Nonetheless, certain areas could be improved, such as access to social media via open windows instead of icons or by encouraging users to employ external recommendation networks, the existence of which is largely overlooked by DMOs.

As Morrison (2013: 173) points out, "DMO websites have become increasingly important as marketing tools and in engaging in communications with travellers". He highlights nine roles of DMO websites, two of which are to build relationships with tourists and to engage travellers in discussions via the social media. In this sense, our research proves that DMOs should better foster dialogue with potential and actual visitors, as a way to deliver a more satisfactory experience, as a way of getting to know the tourists habits, interests and motivations and as a way to inspire and attract new visitors through the comments and opinions of the people that have already visited the destination.

As expected, based on the type of destination, international cities are those that generally score best. They are major world destinations which, owing to their size and resources, would be expected to be at the forefront of communication. Even so, it is surprising that many Spanish destinations are on a par with or outdo these major cities, especially in terms of user-administrator interaction. When it comes to the general results for Spanish destinations, the application of mechanisms related to interactivity and presence in the social web shows variable results, although overall the pages of autonomous communities do score better, while city websites show a wide range of scores. In this regard, it is necessary to take into consideration the fact that the sample includes cities of varying sizes, with visitor numbers that differ enormously, not to mention that they have varying resources. Country brand websites should be addressed separately since they focus on larger territories. In general, they fail to deal with many of the interactivity and social web aspects analysed in this study, but they do stand out for user-user interaction. Spain's website generally falls in line with the results obtained for the websites of the other countries reviewed.

All in all, the methodology used herein provides a useful tool for examining and assessing how DMOs endow their websites with interactivity and link them to the realm of social media. In short, it provides useful information relating to the instruments or mechanisms that could improve relational facets of ODWs.

6. Limitations and future research

This analysis does bear several limitations that could be dealt with in future research. Firstly, the sample was composed mainly by Spanish ODWs, so a more internationally balanced sample would be useful to confirm the validity of the results. Additionally, the study focuses solely on the features and characteristics of the websites, while users' perspectives are not taken into account. A supplementary experimental approach would be helpful in understanding if the best websites in our analysis are actually perceived by users as creating this relational bond. Furthermore, another lack of perspective identified could be the fact that the DMOs' specific objectives are not corroborated for each website. Indeed, the absence of interactivity could be intentional rather than being due to poor performance. A number of interviews and consultations with DMO managers may help address this shortcoming.

Despite all these drawbacks and limitations, the study helps to build a greater understanding of how DMO websites operate and function and what their main functionalities and areas of improvement are.

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