Communication and branding on national tourism websites

Comunicación y *branding* en los sitios web nacionales de turismo

Comunicação e *branding* em sites de turismo nacionais

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ABSTRACT

Official websites are crucial tools for image dissemination, brand promotion and marketing of destinations. National Tourism Organizations are aware of the need to create, maintain and update an Official Destination Website in order to engage with current and potential visitors. This paper presents a quality assessment of the official destination websites of five countries –Spain, Brazil, Argentina, Chile and China– obtained from applying the Web Quality Index. The results show that the best quality is achieved by Spain's official destination website followed by those of Argentina, Chile, Brazil and China. The research also reveals that the national tourism websites require a clear improvement in areas such as interactivity, persuasiveness and commercialization.

RESUMEN

Los sitios web oficiales son herramientas básicas para la difusión de la imagen de los destinos y para la promoción de sus marcas. Las Organizaciones Nacionales de Turismo conocen la importancia de crear, gestionar y actualizar un sitio web oficial para comunicarse con sus visitantes reales y potenciales. Este artículo presenta un análisis de la calidad de los sitios web turísticos oficiales de cinco países –España, Brasil, Argentina, Chile y China–, mediante la aplicación del Índice de Calidad Web. Los resultados muestran que el sitio web turístico oficial de mayor calidad es el de España, seguido del de Argentina, Chile, Brasil y China. El estudio revela también que los sitios web turísticos nacionales necesitan mejorar especialmente en lo que respecta a interactividad, capacidad persuasiva y comercialización.

RESUMO

Os sites oficiais são ferramentas básicas para a difusão da imagem dos destinos e para a promoção de suas marcas. As Organizações Nacionais de Turismo sabem da importância de criar, administrar e atualizar um site oficial para se comunicar com seus visitantes reais e potenciais. Este artigo apresenta uma análise da qualidade dos sites turísticos oficiais de cinco países –Espanha, Brasil, Argentina, Chile e China–, mediante a aplicação do Índice de Qualidade Web. Os resultados mostram que o sítio web turístico oficial de maior qualidade é o da Espanha, seguido dos de Argentina, Chile, Brasil e China. O estudo revela também que os sites turísticos nacionais precisam melhorar especialmente no que diz respeito a interatividade, capacidade persuasiva e comercialização.

INTRODUCTION

Tourism has become a relevant driving force for the economy of many countries (Kotler, Haider & Rein, 1993). According to the World Travel & Tourism Council [WTTC] (2014a), it contributed to 9.5% of total GDP in 2013 and generated 101 million direct jobs. Its magnitude, however, varies highly from one country to another. In the case of Thailand, for example, travel and tourism generated 17.0% of the national GDP, being the third industry in terms of economic revenue. In the case of Russia, conversely, travel and tourism only was 6.0% of the national GDP (WTTC, 2014b).

Due to the economic power of tourism, competition among destinations is increasing at a large pace. This strong competition for being visible in a globalized world, for attracting tourists and, hence, generating revenue is usually led by Destination Marketing Organizations (DMOs), which are defined as organizations "responsible for the marketing of an identifiable destination", and they can operate at a national, state, regional or local level (Pike, 2012, p. 31).

At a national level, DMOs are often organized as a governmental agency, usually supported by the private sector, and they "set the overall agenda for tourism" in a country (Morrison, 2013: 26). Among the tasks of a national DMO, commonly known as National Tourism Organizations, is the implementation of promotion campaigns, distributed globally with the help of a number of tourism offices that operate in specific countries (González-Santos, Fernández-Cavia & Tena, 2014).

But specially, DMOs play "important roles by acting as organizers and facilitators for tourism marketing and development in the destination" (Wang, 2011, p. 8). This is why they must promote their brands using all possible communication channels: advertising, publicity, social media, mobile marketing and official websites (Gretzel, Fesenmaier, Formica & O'Leary, 2006; Fernández-Cavia & López, 2013; Pike & Page, 2014).

Official websites are crucial tools for image dissemination, brand promotion and marketing of destinations (Choi, Lehto & Morrison, 2007; Choi, Lehto & Oleary, 2007; Lee & Gretzel, 2012; Li & Wang, 2010; Luna-Nevarez & Hyman, 2012). National Tourism Organizations (NTOs) are aware of the need to create, maintain and update an Official Destination Website (ODW) to engage with current and potential visitors (Han & Mills, 2006).

According to the Handbook on e-Marketing for Tourism Destinations published by the World Tourism Organization (WTO, 2008), a quality website is crucial for a destination's effectiveness and thus leads to success. However, the absence of a standard tool for gauging the quality of an ODW makes it hard to assess it.

In order to address this challenge, a group of experts (Fernández-Cavia, Díaz-Luque et al., 2013) developed an assessment system capable of measuring the quality of an ODW and representing this quality using a single comparable number called Web Quality Index (WQI) (Fernández-Cavia, Rovira, Díaz-Luque & Cavaller, 2014).

In this research we present the results obtained from applying this assessment system to a sample of five national ODWs, namely from Spain, Brazil, Argentina, Chile and China.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Tourism communication has evolved rapidly in the last years. While at the end of the 20th century it was a common practice to travel on holidays buying the services of an all-inclusive package through a travel agency and tour operator, currently most travelers decide and buy by themselves on the Web. For example, in 2014, 46% of European tourists considered Internet websites the most important source of information when making a decision about travel plans and 66% of them used the Internet in order to organize their holidays (European Commission, 2015). In a parallel study, Xiang, Wang, O'Leary and Fesenmaier (2014) demonstrated that in 2012 85.5% of American travelers used the Internet as an information source for trip planning, far ahead from previous experience (52.7%), travel agencies (29.3%) or magazines (22.2%).

Among other 'external sources' (Jacobsen & Munar, 2012; Llodrà-Riera, Martínez-Ruiz, Jiménez-Sarco & Izquierdo-Yusta, 2015), the ever growing use of the Internet by tourists has resulted in an increasingly vital need for destinations to possess a website (Blumrodt & Palmer, 2013). Indeed, the ODW of an NTO may play a role in the decision-making stage of travel, serving as an attraction or bait to draw users' attention towards the destination whilst serving as a trigger and driving force transforming their interest into a booking or specific purchase. As a matter of fact, destination websites "are not mere technological artifacts, but complex communication tools, which impact on several levels –from destination management to destination promotion and commercialization" (Inversini, Cantoni & De Pietro, 2014, p. 565).

In a global context, for the more seasoned travelers many national destinations may be highly interchangeable. Accordingly, an appealing, persuasive ODW must

stand out tipping the balance towards a specific destination or another (Choi, Lehto & Oleary, 2007). It may also play a crucial role when the holiday is being enjoyed, especially thanks to the popularity of mobile devices (Hyun, Lee & Hu, 2009).

But, how should an ODW be designed in order to be appealing and persuasive? What elements should be considered in order to avoid falling short of users' expectations?

THE INTERNET AS A COMMUNICATION CHANNEL FOR DESTINATIONS

The tourism sector has witnessed huge changes in recent years, largely due to the application of new technologies (Gretzel & Fesenmaier, 2003; Buhalis & Law, 2008; Berné, García-González, García-Uceda & Múgica, 2015). As some authors have highlighted, tourism is an industry that intensively uses information and communication technologies (Standing, Tang-Taye & Boyer, 2014). Management, marketing and booking systems, as well as promotion and communication systems, have likely been at the fore of these changes. In certain cases, the operating methods of companies and destinations have been drastically altered, and the behavior and expectations of tourists have similarly undergone substantial modifications (Neuhofer, Buhalis & Ladkin, 2013).

Social media (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010; Hvass & Munar, 2012; Ayeh, Au & Law, 2013; Oliveira & Panyik, 2015), mobile applications (Kwon, Bae & Blum, 2013; Scolari & Fernández-Cavia, 2014; Lamsfus, Wang, Alzua & Xiang, 2014), photograph and video sharing platforms (Lim, Chung & Weaver, 2012; Stepchenkova & Zhan, 2013; Kahn, 2014) and recommendation sites (Kladou & Mavragani, 2015) are now powerful tools for contacting potential visitors, conveying information, and communicating destination brands.

But still, nowadays, an increasing number of tourists deem a website to be the foremost source of information when deciding where to travel (Choi, Lehto & Oleary, 2007; Jeong, Holland, Jun & Gibson, 2012). As a result, the first virtual experience with the destination is of vital significance, an experience which can be conveyed through the official website (Kim & Fesenmaier, 2008), as it can virtually transport "the consumers of travel information to the destination to support the formation of concrete expectations" (Lee & Gretzel, 2012, p. 1270).

THE OFFICIAL DESTINATION WEBSITE (ODW)

An ODW is a communication platform (Mich, Franch & Gaio, 2003) providing a host of benefits. For the tourist, it provides up-to-date reliable information. It can be accessed from anywhere in the world and at any time, even from the palm of your hand using a mobile device (Stienmentz, Levy & Boo, 2012). It makes it possible to customize content according to profiles, interests and languages, and it also allows for several means of interaction when it comes to the message, the sender and other users.

Interactivity, in fact, has been deemed as a main factor for the destination website's attractiveness and persuasiveness (Huertas, Rovira & Fernández-Cavia, 2011; Oh & Sundar, 2015). Other important features are the adequate use of pictures (Lee & Gretzel, 2012), the quality of the information provided (Choi, Lehto & Oleary, 2007) and the perceived usefulness and ease of use (Dickinger & Stangl, 2013).

For the DMO, an ODW entails a moderate, controllable cost, considering the impact it can provide. It allows full control of information and enables tourism products and services to be monitored. Moreover, the destination website allows the destination to tailor the tourism experience it seeks to provide. Similarly, it brings together all the information available in one single source and provides knowledge of demand using web analysis. As Luna-Nevarez and Hyman (2012) put it, "DMOs should refine their websites for two reasons: (1) as the main interface between a destination and potential tourists, WWW users believe such websites represent destinations, and (2) such websites allow visitors to evaluate the products, services, and experiences offered by a destination" (p. 94).

Indeed, Morrison (2013) suggests that websites are the most important part of the DMO marketing strategy, as they communicate destination positioning and branding, build relationships with tourists and travel trade, allow bookings and reservations, and generate visitor databases and research.

DESTINATION WEBSITE ANALYSIS

The importance of the role of an ODW in promoting and marketing tourist destinations has led to the enablement of several systems to analyze their quality, even though some researchers still think that no single agreed methodology for assessment has been put in place (Law, Qi & Buhalis, 2010). However, several specific models for evaluating DMO websites have been created in the last years, although they vary widely in goals, approach or comprehensiveness. Hereafter we review some of the most interesting proposals.

In a research paper published in 2006, Han and Mills, in order to analyze a sample of NTOs' websites, reviewed the existing literature and developed an

evaluation model called "online promotion evaluation instrument". The model gathered the items assessed in previous studies and organized them into three groups: aesthetics features (destination visualization and Web design); informative features (uniqueness, monetary value and cultural promotion); and interactive features (e-travel planners and online communities). The model, nevertheless, only allowed to measure if a specific feature was present or not, on a dichotomous scale, so there was little margin for a refined evaluation.

Later on, using a qualitative meta-analysis based on 153 research articles addressing the topic, Park and Gretzel (2007) established that the factors that drive website success for destinations were nine: information quality, user-friendliness, adaptability, security/privacy, visual appearance, reliability, interactivity, customization and satisfaction. Additionally, they observed that, up to that time, destination website evaluation frameworks failed to integrate measures to properly assess interactivity, persuasion and communication issues.

With a similar purpose, Law, Qi and Buhalis (2010) classified the then existing methods of assessing tourism website effectiveness into five different typologies: counting methods, basically consisting in a checklist to verify the presence of specific attributes on a website; user judgment methods, employing researchers, consumers or potential consumers as evaluators of user's satisfaction; automated methods, that involve the application of software systems; numerical computation methods, that use mathematical functions to compute website performance; and combined methods, that entail a combination of the different aforementioned approaches. As research gaps, they identified that the existing techniques were not truly tourism-oriented and the fact that, if the assessment methods rely on human judges, they are subject to personal bias.

Li and Wang (2010), on the other hand, in their analysis of 31 Chinese provincial tourism administrations' websites, apply an assessment methodology involving five dimensions: information, communication, transaction, relationship, and technical merit. Each of these dimensions is evaluated by an expert panel by checking a list of items based on previous studies. The performance of the items is measured on a 5-point Likert scale and then weighted depending on their importance. As a result, they elaborated a ranking of website effectiveness of all the ODWs examined.

Another review paper on website evaluation studies in tourism was published in 2011 by Ip, Law and Lee. In their work, these authors classified the existing assessment models into three kinds: evaluation by phases, evaluation by features and evaluation by features and effectiveness. The latter could include rankings, traffic, expert evaluation and user satisfaction as indicators. At the end, they suggest that "theories and models developed in other academic disciplines could be incorporated into tourism and hospitality website evaluations to overcome their limitations"; and that new evaluation models "should be aware of the accessibility movement which can influence website design" (p. 260).

A year later, the system for analysis put forward by Luna-Nevarez and Hyman (2012) focuses on six categories: primary focus, visual and presentation style, navigation and interactivity, textual information, advertising, and social media and travel aids. However, in their content analysis, these dimensions are solely assessed on the home page, so their assessment system, though clear and useful, seems not comprehensive enough.

Dickinger and Stangl (2013) make certain criticism of the constructs and items deployed in website evaluation studies, arguing that some constructs' items may be included or deleted arbitrarily and then "measures are often idiosyncratic limiting comparability to other studies" (p. 772). Based on the opinion of users, they propose an evaluation model to assess website performance built upon eight dimensions: usefulness, ease of use, enjoyment, website design, trust, content quality, navigational challenge and system availability.

Morrison (2013), in turn, refers to the DMO WebEVAL model, that measures the effectiveness and quality of the websites by assessing four complementary dimensions: the technical perspective, the customer perspective (basically, user-friendliness), the marketing perspective (positioning, branding and commercialization) and the informational perspective.

In one of the last contributions, Tran & Yan (2014), building upon Li and Wang's model, present an extended evaluation framework based on six dimensions, namely Information, Communication, Transaction, Relationship, Search Engine Optimization and Technical Merit. These dimensions are assessed through a content analysis of the website too, but merely checking if 62 items are present or not on the website.

Although all these contributions are valid and good, in order to assess the quality of the five national websites selected, we will use the methodology of

Fernández-Cavia et al. (2014) involving a parameter-based assessment system providing a Web Quality Index outcome between 0 and 1. Similar in approach to Li and Wang's, it is though more complex, thorough and nuanced, analyses the whole website and not only the homepage as in Luna-Nevarez and Hyman's model, and allows reducing the performance of a destination website to a single and easily comparable figure, as we will explain in the following section. It also incorporates, as Ip, Law and Lee demanded, theories developed in other disciplines (especially in computer science, graphic design, semiotics, public relations, economy and advertising) and it considers accessibility issues, neglected in previous studies.

METHODOLOGY

According to the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO, 2014), the five most visited countries in 2012 were France (83 million visitors), the United States (67 million), China (57 million), Spain (57 mil-lion) and Italy (46 million). For our sample, we have chosen from those destinations Spain and China. We decided to compare these world powers with an emerging region in the sphere of tourism which shows major potential for growth: South America. To do so, we chose the three biggest national destinations in this region: Brazil (5.6 million visitors), Argentina (5.5 million) and Chile (3.5 million).

Table 1. Study sample

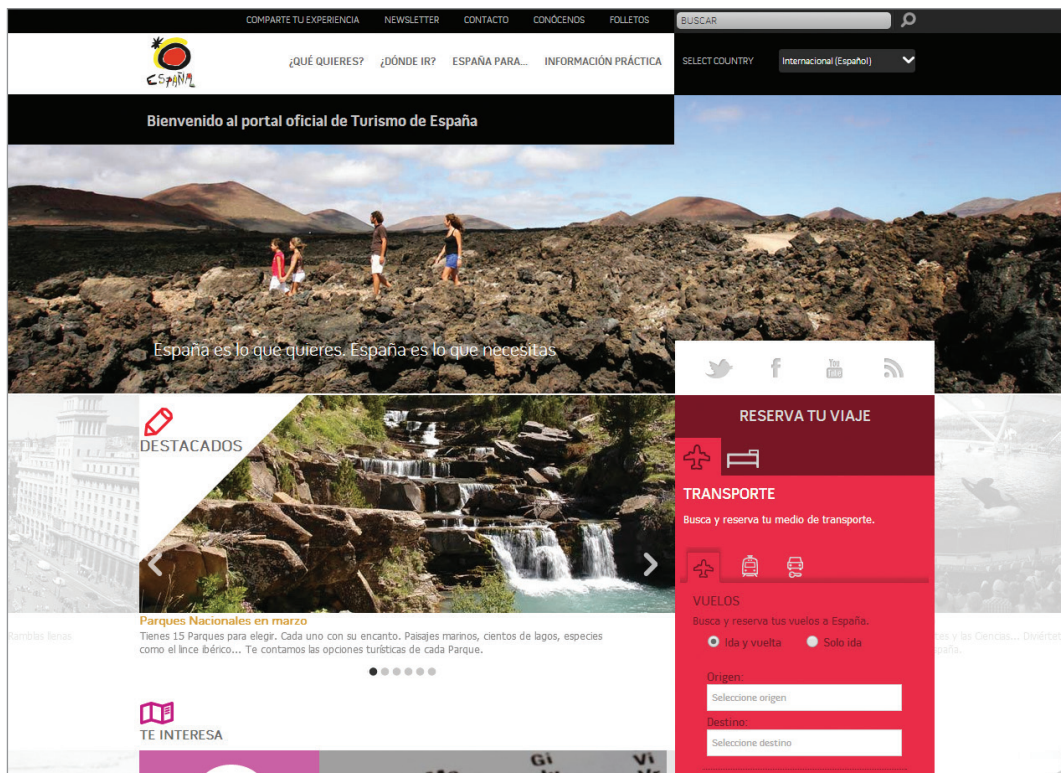| Country	ODW	Visitors in 2012 (millions)
China	www.travelchina.gov.cn	57.7
Spain	www.spain.info	57.7
Brazil	www.visitbrasil.com	5.6
Argentina	www.argentina.travel	5.5
Chile	www.chile.travel	3.5

Source: Compiled by authors.

Figure 1. China's ODW

Source: www.travelchina.gov.cn
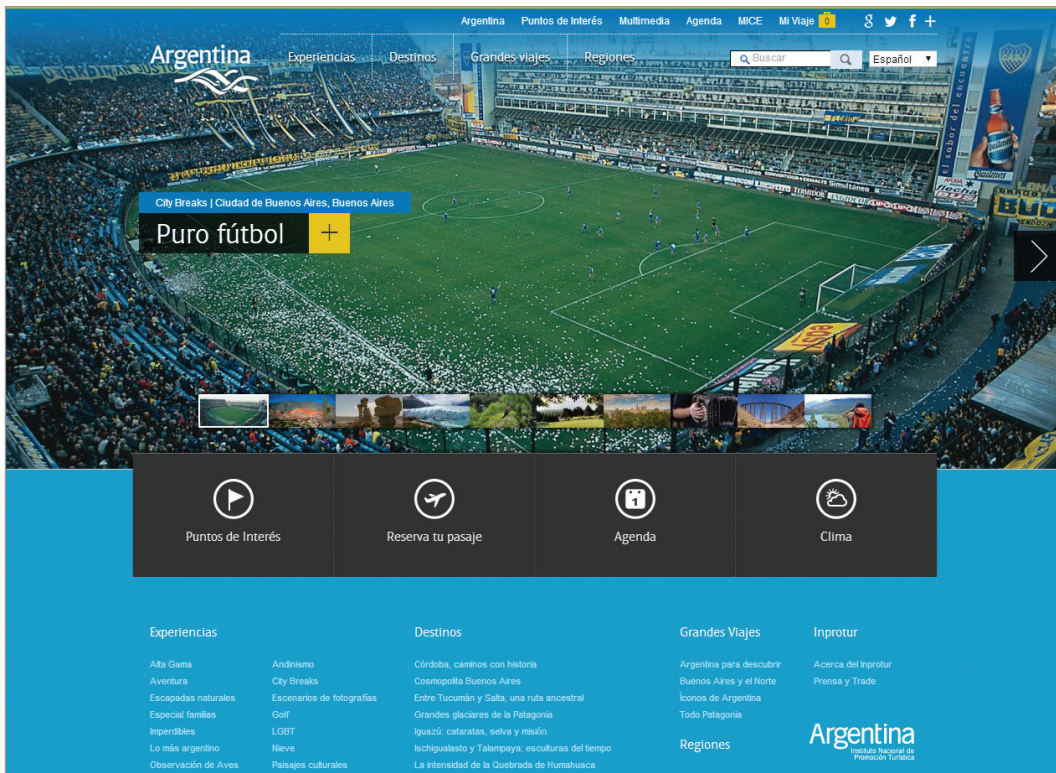
Figure 2. Spain's ODW

Source: www.spain.info

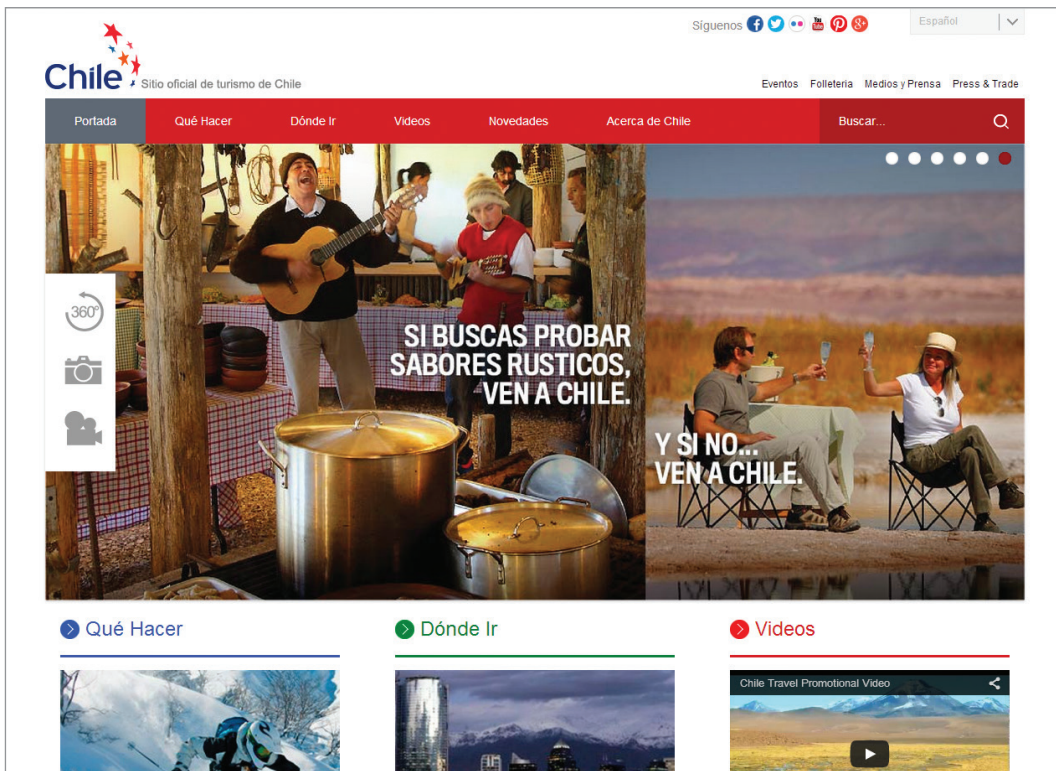Figure 3. Brazil's ODW

Source: www.visitbrasil.com

Figure 4. Argentina's ODW

Source: www.argentina.travel

Figure 5. Chile's ODW

Source: www.chile.travel

In order to assess the websites, we used the Web Quality Index method developed by the CODETUR project (Fernández-Cavia et al., 2014). The system focuses on twelve parameters assessed using 127 indicators. By verifying each of the indicators –the value of which is weighted using a specific figure– a score between 0 and 1 is obtained for each parameter. The average score for the twelve parameters gives an index, also in the range between 0 and 1, known as the Web Quality Index. The greater the quality of the website assessed, the closer the WQI will be to 1.

The assessment of the websites was done by two analysts, each of which examined the full sample between March 17 and 26, 2014. The intercoder agreement for Cohen's Kappa index obtained a value of 0.87.

RESULTS

By applying the WQI to the five national destinations in the sample we compiled a large body of data providing a range of differing interpretations and readings.

PER-DESTINATION ANALYSIS

If we firstly observe the overall WQI obtained for each destination, the average score stands at a satisfactory 0.56, although there are noteworthy differences. The greatest score is obtained for Spain's ODW with a WQI of 0.72, well above the average. The lowest score is for China's ODW, merely reaching a WQI of 0.35. The three destinations in South America obtained similar results, as shown in chart 1.

Nonetheless, these results can be broken down and the behavior of websites may be analyzed for each of the parameters studied.

For instance, in the case of China's ODW we observe that most parameters fall below the average obtained for the five destinations reviewed.

It is possible to observe a significant underperformance in relation to Web Positioning, Marketing, Discourse Analysis and Interactivity. The results regarding Social Web and Mobile Communication are particularly concerning.

This shows that China's ODW should improve generally, but above all when it comes to Relational aspects and Persuasive aspects.

Table 2. WQI. Areas of assessment, parameters and indicators

| Areas of assessment	Parameters	Description	Number of indicators
Technical aspects	Information architecture	Website organization and structure.	11
	Web positioning	Adequate design for suitable positioning within natural search results in search engines.	6
	Usability and accessibility	User-friendliness and suitable for use by people with sensory difficulties.	19
Communicative aspects	Home page	Suitability and appeal of the website's home page.	14
	Languages	Choice of languages and cultural adaptation of contents.	6
	Content amount and quantity	Informational content in terms of variety and its suitability to tourists' needs.	17
Relational aspects	Interactivity	Two-way communicative relationship between the user and the content, the sender and other users.	12
	Social web	Presence of 2.0 tools on the website.	8
	Mobile communication	Adaptation for mobile devices.	5
Persuasive aspects	Discourse analysis	Website's persuasive capacity in text and images.	8
	Branding	Brand image, functional and emotional elements, brand values and coherence.	13
	Marketing	Options for distributing tourism products and services.	8

Source: Compiled by authors.

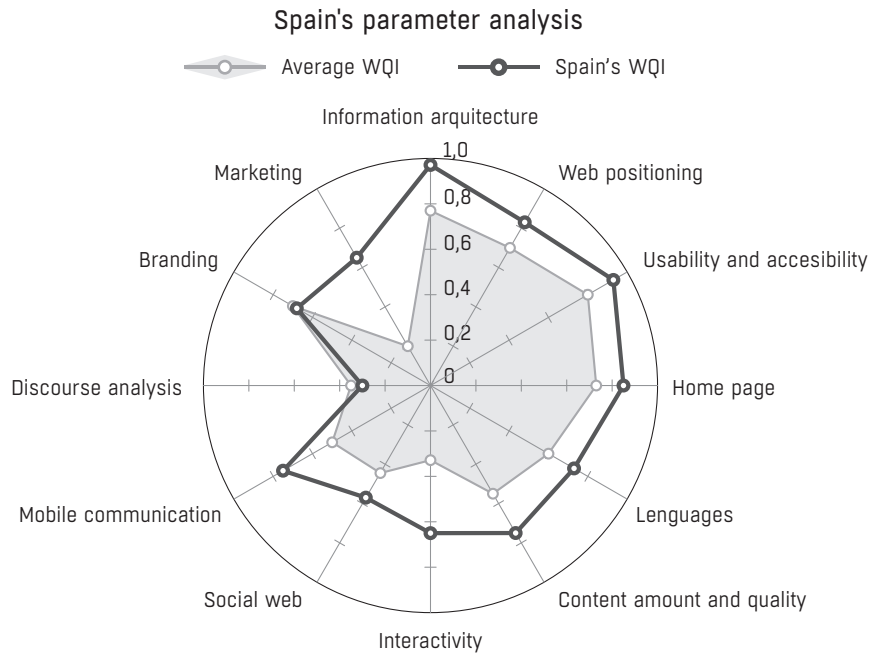Chart 1. WQI for each country's official tourism website

Web Quality Index
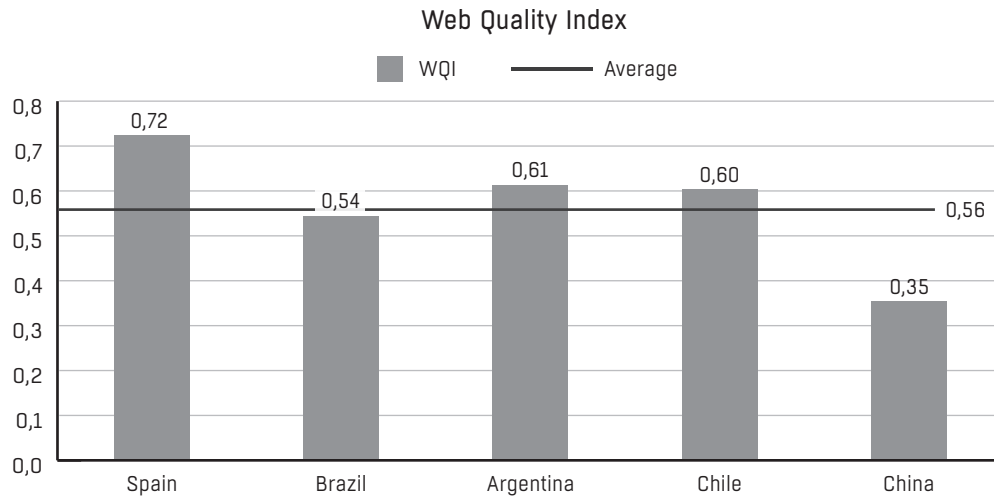
Source: Compiled by authors.

Chart 2. China's ODW. Parameter analysis

China's parameter analysis
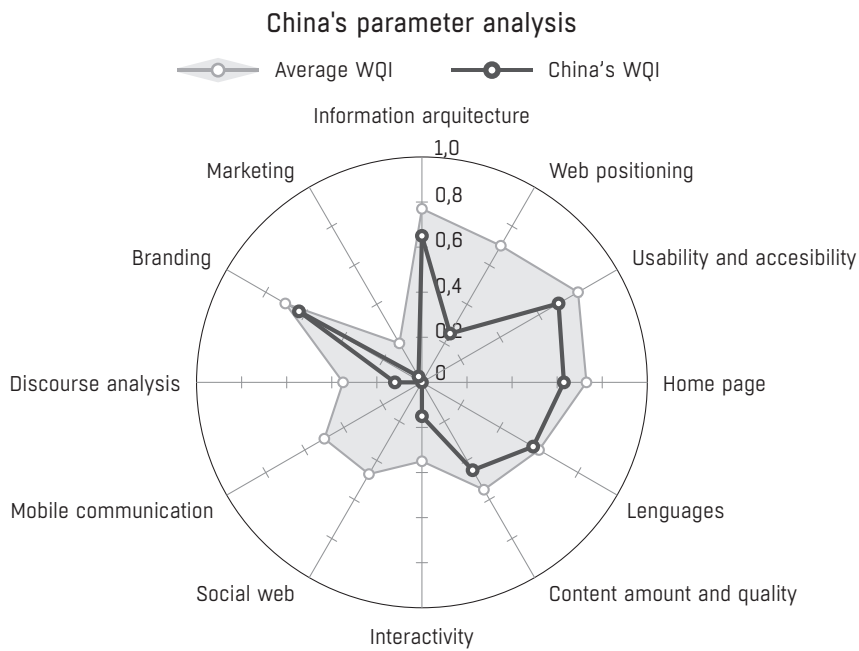
Source: Compiled by authors.

Chart 3. Spain's ODW. Parameter analysis

Spain's parameter analysis

Source: Compiled by authors.

Chart 4. Chile's ODW. Parameter analysis

Chile's parameter analysis
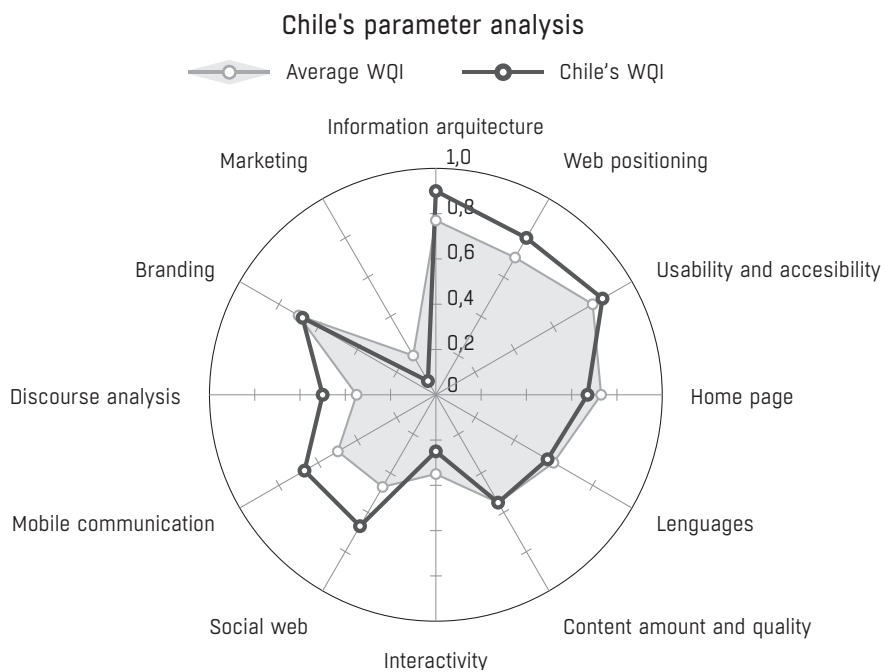
Source: Compiled by authors.

Chart 5. Brazil's ODW. Parameter analysis

Brazil's parameter analysis
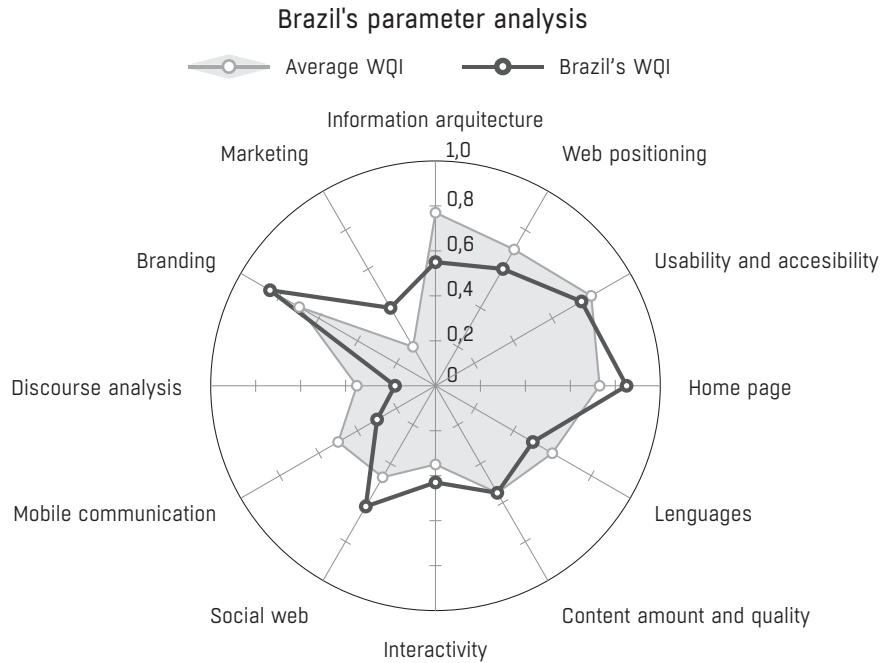
Source: Compiled by authors.

On the other hand, Spain's website obtained the best scores in the sample for seven of the twelve parameters used.

It stands out particularly for Content amount and quality, Information architecture, Marketing, Interactivity and Mobile communication. It only performs slightly below average for the parameters Branding and Discourse Analysis.

Chile's ODW, with an overall WQI of 0.60, stands out for Social Web, where it secured the highest score in the sample on account of the fact, for instance, that it is the sole website that incorporates an external recommendation social network into its home page (TripAdvisor).

It is prominent for Technical and Communicative aspects, but it does have much scope for improvement in two areas in particular: Interactivity and Marketing.

For Marketing, the website does not benefit from a system for booking accommodation, transfers,

events or restaurants. It does boast a search engine for accommodation, but it was not operational during the time the analysis was conducted. As for Interactivity, Chile's official website does not have multimedia viewing or a trip planner and users are unable to publish content on the website or assess the existing content.

Brazil's performance places the ODW in the second with the lowest scores. It stands out in three parameters: Home page, Usability and accessibility and Branding. The weakest parameters were: Information architecture and Discourse analysis.

The last couple receives the lowest score regarding other ODWs. During the analysis, Brazil's ODW presented problems in the organization of the content. It did not have standard tabs, the page length was extremely long, and it was impossible to find an internal search engine, for instance.

Chart 6. Argentina's ODW. Parameter analysis

Argentina's parameter analysis

○ Average WQI   ● Argentina's WQI
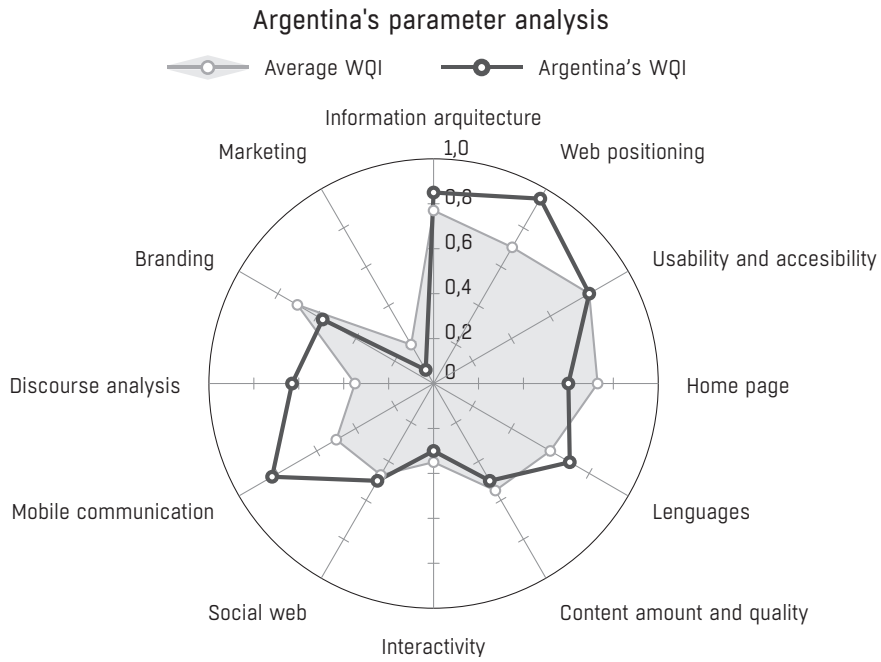
Source: Compiled by authors.

Chart 7. Average performance per-parameter of the ODWs in the sample

Average per-parameter

○ Average per-parameter   ● Average WQI
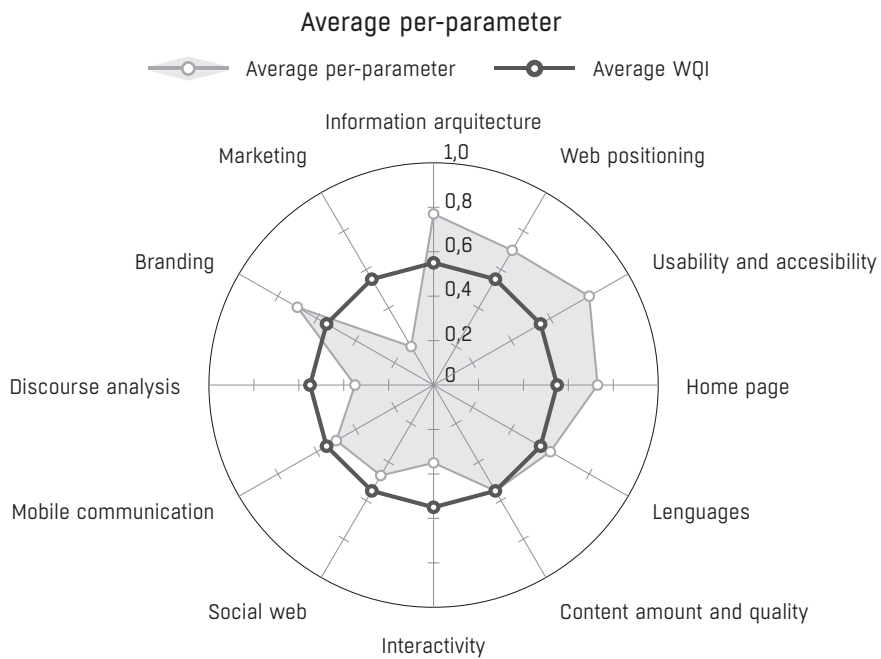
Source: Compiled by authors.

If we look at the last ODW assessed, the one belonging to Argentina's NTO, we can observe an optimal performance in three parameters: Web positioning, Discourse analysis, and Mobile communication. Conversely, some scores are way below the average: Marketing, Social web, and Branding.

Nevertheless, we must bear in mind that the clear absence of options for distributing products or services through the ODW can respond to a strategic decision from the destination managers. Meanwhile, at the Branding parameter stands out the absence of a slogan, and a video that supports the creation of an emotional/functional identity for the destination.

ANALYSIS PER-PARAMETER

Another way of gleaning useful information from the methodology analysis is to focus attention on the behavior per-parameter. Thus, if we look at how the sample of five destinations performs for each parameter we can see that results are slightly higher for Technical aspects, given that Information Architecture (0.77), Web Positioning (0.69) and Usability and Accessibility (0.81) attain scores that are above the general average (0.56).

The parameter results showing the greatest shortcomings are Marketing (0.24), Discourse Analysis (0.35) and Interactivity (0.37). Firstly, this suggests that NTOs do not view their ODWs as platforms for marketing products and services, in all likelihood owing to the complexity entailed by the size of the destination and due to the fact that this function is reserved for ODWs linked to region or city sub-brands.

Secondly, the low score for Discourse Analysis shows shortcomings in understanding an ODW as more than just an information desk and instead as a persuasive tool providing rational and emotional reasoning to encourage a potential traveler to visit the destination.

Thirdly, the poor results obtained for Interactivity show that destinations are reluctant to grant the floor to users in what is deemed as an institutional communication framework: the ODW.

By and large, the differences in the results per-parameter match the results of a study that applied the same methodology to examine the ODWs of the seventeen Spanish autonomous communities (Fernández-Cavia, Vinyals-Mirabent & López-Pérez, 2013). In this paper, the parameters determined as Technical aspects similarly attained the highest score, while Marketing and Interactivity where two of the three areas that scored the lowest results.

Contrariwise, Discourse Analysis –which obtained an average of 0.41 for the ODWs of Spanish regions– scored slightly above the average in this sample, whereas for Mobile Communication the average score of websites of Spanish regions stood at a mere 0.27, compared to 0.51 achieved in this study.

The WQI analysis system makes it possible to draw comparisons among destinations on a per-param-

Chart 8. Home page. Parameter analysis
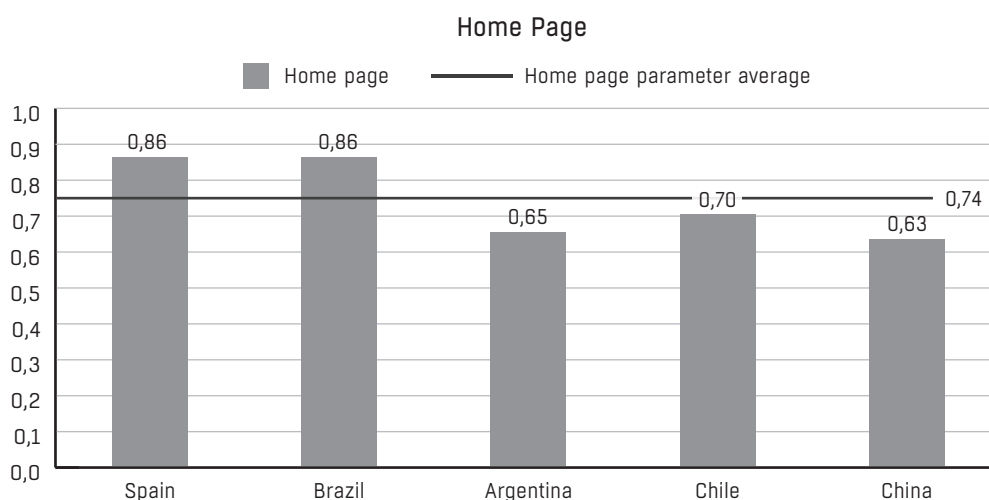
Source: Compiled by authors.

eter basis, in other words, studying the difference in performance of each of the ODWs for the same study parameter.

For instance, along these lines we can compare the results achieved by the five ODWs examined for the Home Page parameter.

For the Home Page parameter, the ODWs analyzed attained an average score of 0.74, indicative of good quality. This is especially significant because the Home Page is deemed as the gateway to the ODW, giving tourists their first impression, meaning it is paramount in encouraging users to continue browsing or inviting them to leave the website if the quality is poor (Kim & Fesenmaier, 2008).

The five Home Pages in the sample easily identified the destination promoted; they showed logos as pertinent and incorporated pictures linked to the destination, especially in the case of China's ODW, which featured the panda bear.

For Content Amount and Quality, the average is somewhat lower at 0.56, indicating that the information provided to users could be improved. For instance, travel in the country is detailed in a vague way even when enquiring for a city in particular. Argentina, Chile and China do not incorporate tools for finding accommodation (or at least it is not operational in the case of Chile). With the exception of Brazil's ODW, no emergency telephone numbers are indicated. The ODWs for Brazil, Argentina, Chile

and China also fail to provide specific content for persons with a disability.

If we review the results for Interactivity, we can see that the results greatly vary according to the destinations. Even if the average for the sample shows an improvable 0.37, Spain's ODW shows a score of 0.65, while China's ODW shows a scant 0.15, indicating that the latter is a website incorporating few interactive options: for example, there are no virtual tours or interactive videos, no stories or experiences are included from actual travelers, there is no option to contribute with content or offer remarks and there is no scope for engaging in a live online chat.

As for the ODWs being adapted for browsing using mobile devices and the range of specific applications available for such devices, the parameter Mobile Communication also shows a wide range of scores.

Although the average for the five ODWs analyzed achieves an acceptable 0.51, Argentina's website stands out with a score of 0.83, while China's ODW fails to show any of the indicators comprising this analysis. In other words, while Argentina's ODW includes a specific version for mobile devices with automatic recognition and offers users a number of mobile applications linked to the destination with multiple functionalities, China's ODW fails to provide any of these options.

Indeed, the analysis does not look into the reasons for the low performance of certain parameters, which may be attributed to a strategic decision on the part of the NTO.

Chart 9. Interactivity. Parameter analysis
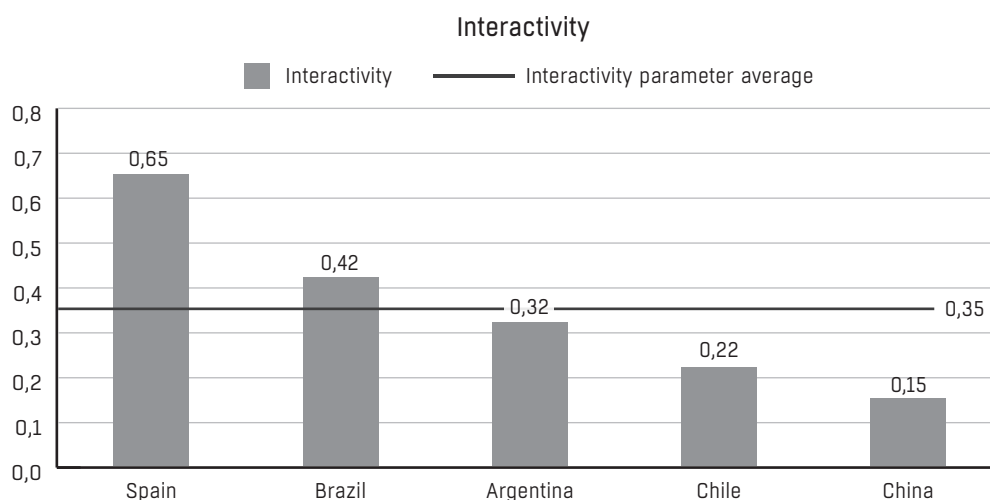
Source: Compiled by authors.

ANALYSIS PER-INDICATOR

Another possible approach is a specific study per-indicator. We may focus on the presence or lack thereof and on the quality of a specific element or host of elements deemed relevant.

Along these lines, we may remark, for example, that the use of trip planners by the ODWs in the sample is widespread (only Chile fails to provide travelers with this tool) and that the best developed trip planner is the one incorporated on Spain's website.

We can also see that all the websites analyzed, with the exception of China, clearly distinguish the various target audiences to which the destination is addressed, although only in the case of Spain does this segmentation hold a prominent spot on the website's home page.

China and Brazil are the only ODWs that invite users visiting their websites to register, thereby obtaining information which may be of great use. On two of the sample websites, the internal search engine cannot be found on all pages and only one has a section informing users about the rules for accessing the site.

Only Spain and Brazil include a system for finding and seeking information on accommodation, but none of the websites reviewed incorporates a system for searching for restaurants, and they also fail to include a comprehensive billing system for the products and services the users wish to buy.

The ODWs providing the greatest number of language options for viewing the websites are Argentina, Chile and Spain, although only in the case of the latter does the language option also incorporate countries of origin.

Color coordination between the logo of the tourist brand and the website design is present in all instances; however, it is greatest in the case of the ODWs of Argentina, Chile and Brazil. Nonetheless, China's website shows the most distinctive pictures characteristic of the region.

The five websites in the study also allow free downloads of a host of material (maps, trails, leaflets and guides), but none of them allow users to vote on the content posted, while certain ODWs of European cities, such as Vienna or Madrid, do provide this option.

Spain and China are the only ODWs in the sample that do not use picture platforms on external hosting services specializing in the publication of photographs, but China's ODW is the only website that fails to use external video hosting platforms.

CONCLUSIONS

ODWs are important communication tools, although surprisingly they have been studied mainly, until now, from the tourism field, and not from communication studies. In this paper, we present a quality assessment of five national websites applying an evaluation model built by communication researchers.

The ODWs of national destinations included in the sample (China, Spain, Brazil, Argentina and Chile) have a generally satisfactory quality (an average of 0.56), even if they bear much variation. The best result is attained by Spain's ODW with a WQI of 0.72, but it does have scope for improvement in certain parameters such as Discourse analysis (0.31) and Social web (0.52). In other words, the persuasive approach of the website should be improved along with its connectivity and content with the available social media.

The poorest result in the analysis is shown by China's ODW, with a WQI of 0.35, revealing major general shortcomings and indicating that the ODW needs to be changed or drastically improved in order to reach a quality standard comparable to that of other destination websites. Specifically, this improvement is particularly needed when it comes to Web Positioning, Marketing, Interactivity, Social Web and Mobile Communication.

Chile's ODW performs excellently in Technical aspects, as well as in Mobile communication and Social Web. It has still room for improvement in Interactivity and Marketing. Similarly, Argentina's ODW should enhance their performance in the same parameters, whereas Brazil's ODW falls short of required standards on Information architecture, Mobile communication and Discourse analysis.

If we have a look at the overall results per parameters, we can see that parameters classified as Relational aspects scored lowest in the sample, even though two parameters deemed as Persuasive aspects (Branding and Discourse analysis) also showed a low degree of performance. These results are consistent with previous research (Li & Wang, 2010; Luna-Nevárez & Hyman, 2012; Fernández-Cavia, Vinyals-Mirabent & López-Pérez, 2013), demonstrating that destination websites can be definitely improved through the application of website assessment, especially in relationship and commercialization dimensions.

Destination managers should finally overcome the conceptualization of the website as an information distributor and pay more attention to creating bonds and interchange with users, visitors and potential tourists.

We have also demonstrated the applicability and usefulness of the analysis system provided by the WQI:

it is able to identify strengths and weaknesses in the ODWs according to a general standard agreed on by experts, although it cannot go into the reasons and causes that lay behind the outcomes.

For instance, an NTO may for a number of reasons decide not to use its ODW as a platform for commercialize tourism products and services, albeit contrary to the recommendations of the World Tourism Organization (WTO, 2008). This decision would of course mean that, since no system is provided for booking or selling accommodation, travel, museum and show tickets, etc., the score obtained by the ODW for Marketing would be poor, having an adverse effect on the general WQI.

Consequently, the data compiled by our methodology should be reviewed in relative terms, always considering the context and goals of the ODW in question but cast light on the performance and quality of the national tourism official destination websites.

The WQI, though, is clearly capable of providing destination managers with useful information, in order to improve their official destination websites and to monitor what competitors are doing.

In the years to come, the Web will continue to increase its influence among tourists, and the destination websites will keep on playing a basic role in tourism communication. It will be then very important for destination managers to periodically assess the quality of their official websites and to rely on a scientifically sound and innovative system to do it.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

DMO: Destination Marketing Organization. It refers to the institution, agency or organization responsible for the promotion of a tourist destination.
NTO: National Tourism Organization. It's a destination marketing organization at a national level.
ODW: Official Destination Website. It's the website created, maintained and managed by an official destination marketing organization.
WQI: Web Quality Index. An assessment system for evaluating destination websites.
WTO: World Tourism Organization.

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