

DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVES OF WEB SITE PERFORMANCE ANALYSIS FROM CROATIAN HOTELS

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Abstract

While research on hotel website appraisal is evolving, there are still gaps in the available research. To help fill these gaps, this research evaluated the websites of Croatia's hotels from the perspectives of user-friendliness, site attractiveness, marketing effectiveness, and Food and Beverage (F&B) informativeness. Additional analyses were performed to examine the potential differences in website performance between hotels in regards to their characteristics: category, type, size and region. A team of 30 trained evaluators assessed the websites of a random sample of 197 hotels using the updated balanced scorecard (BSC) approach. Although an overwhelming majority of hoteliers recognize the importance of online presence, most are not effectively using websites. Study ends with a discussion of conclusions and implications for hotel operators and academic researchers.

Keywords - *website evaluation, hotels, MANOVA, cluster analysis, neural network.*

1 INTRODUCTION

A recent study in the tourism and hospitality context revealed that website quality directly and positively impacts on customer satisfaction and purchase intentions [2]. Moreover, in the academic literature, Internet has been recognized as increasingly important information dissemination, communication, online purchasing, and distribution channel for hotels and consumers ([5]; [25]). As of December 2011, there are over 2.2 billion Internet users worldwide [22]. According to the Nielsen [26] company survey of over 27,000 Internet users in 55 countries, booking a hotel/tour ranked fifth out of 21 products/services global consumers were expected to purchase online in the next six months. Moreover, hotel websites ranked second in the U.S. [9] and fourth internationally [30] as a source of travellers' trip planning information. In response to the increasing demand for online services, many hotels have established websites to promote their services and products, strengthen their customer relationships, and convert e-lookers into e-buyers ([19]; [24]; [27]). However, Internet presence is not a guarantee of success [21], and many businesses have failed to utilize their websites effectively ([7]; [17]).

To improve the effectiveness of a business website, evaluation of website performance has been a growing concern among tourism scholars since the late 1990s [19]. Despite these tendencies, a closer inspection of the tourism website evaluation reveals the following two gaps in the available research. The first research gap refers to the insufficient amount of academic inquiry into hotel website quality in

general. Namely, there are only 25 peer reviewed hotel website performance-related studies [19]. Second, extant hotel website evaluation studies lack (understandably so) measures that are reflective of the latest sought-after website-related information, services, and applications by today's sophisticated travellers. Indeed, since the rapidly developing technology forces hotels to frequently update their websites, researchers need to continuously update their website evaluation instruments by adding new items or characteristics [20].

The lack of scholarly research on hotel websites and the need to update the website evaluation measurement instruments with the latest attributes and trends form the basis for this study. The main objectives of this study are to:

1. Update and adapt a previously developed and validated instrument to evaluate the hotels' websites using the modified balanced scorecard (BSC) approach;
2. Use the BSC to assess the relative strengths and weaknesses of hotel websites from the user friendliness, site attractiveness, marketing effectiveness, and F&B informativeness perspectives;
3. Empirically explore whether the hotel website performance is associated with hotel's characteristics;
4. Classify hotels regarding their website perspectives, and according to these results verify the predictive abilities of neural networks in classifying hotels into clusters based on their characteristics;
5. Provide a set of recommendations to help hotel operators improve the design and marketing of their websites.

Ultimately, this study's findings can serve as a point of reference to aid practitioners in realizing which aspects of their website need improvement and their website's position in the marketplace against competitors. For academics, this study provides a systematic approach for evaluating the websites of hotels, helps them better understand what has been achieved thus far, and is expected to indicate gaps/areas for further research.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows; we first review the existing research on hotel website evaluation and the BSC's application in the lodging sector. We then describe the methodology employed, followed by a discussion of the results and the study's conclusions and implications

2 HOTEL WEB SITE EVALUATION

Hospitality and tourism scholars have conducted various studies examining the performance of hotel websites. On the basis of the prior studies' evaluation methods, the existing literature on hotel website evaluations generally falls into five major categories: counting, user judgment, automated, numerical computation, and combined method [19].

Briefly, in studies adopting counting methods, the website evaluators (i.e., students, researchers, consumers, suppliers, practitioners, or policymakers) verify the presence or absence of a number of website attributes on a well-prepared checklist, where most items on a checklist are taken from adopted or modified models [19]. For instance, Lee and Morrison [20] measured and compared the overall effectiveness of upscale hotel websites and checked the correlation between overall website effectiveness and size of upscale hotels in South Korea and the U.S. by using a modified Morrison et al.'s [24] balanced scorecard (BSC) approach with 72 technical, customer, marketing effectiveness, and upscale critical success factors. Musante et al. [25] evaluated the websites of Singaporean hotels in four industry segments using 27 items grouped into five major sections: company information, product offerings, transactions, support services, and interactive functions. Vrana and Zafiropoulos [31] evaluated the websites of rural SME hotels in ten Mediterranean countries using 87 items grouped into two categories – website design characteristics (i.e., interactivity, navigation, and functionality) and website marketing characteristics (i.e., those relating to property and those relating to area).

Schmidt et al. [28] evaluated and compared the website characteristics of small hotels in Spain and Brazil through 26 items organized in eight categories: promotion, price, product, multimedia, navigability, reservation system, customer retention, and privacy and security. Spremić and Strugar [29] evaluated the websites of upscale hotels in Croatia using 29 items grouped into five categories:

facilities information, reservation information, contact information, website management, and surrounding information. Bai et al. [2] evaluated 29 e-relationship marketing (e-RM) website features of the world's top hotel companies using a progressive five-level e-RM model comprising basic, reactive, accountable, proactive, and partnership levels. Baloglu and Pekcan [3] utilized content analysis to evaluate the websites of a group of 4- and 5-star hotels in Turkey in terms of 45 site design characteristics (interactivity, navigation, and functionality) and marketing practices on Internet. In the first tourism study to use the BSC, Morrison et al. [24] evaluated the websites of Scottish small hotels using 21 technical, marketing, internal, and customer critical success factors.

A user judgment method involves the evaluation of user satisfaction or perceptions using consumers, academic researchers, practitioners, and policymakers as evaluators [19]. For example, Essawy [8] employed frequent Internet shoppers in the analysis of three UK-based hotels in three industry segments to test the influence of website usability dimensions (i.e., interface, information, and service quality) on purchase and revisit/recommendation intentions. They found that severe problems related to all three usability dimensions negatively affected the participants' purchase and revisit intentions. Using hypothetical lodging websites, Jeong and Lambert [14] employed 38 items to examine the influence of four information quality constructs (i.e., perceived usefulness, perceived ease of use, perceived accessibility, and attitude) on consumers' perceived behaviours (i.e., intention to use information, information use, and recommendation). They found perceived usefulness and attitudes to be significant predictors of the customers' behavioural intentions.

Automated methods rely on software systems for website evaluation [19]. An example of an automated method is a study by Chan and Law [6], who applied an Automatic Website Evaluation System to evaluate Hong Kong hotel websites in three industry segments on 10 features grouped in five dimensions: website usability, interface effectiveness, information, ease of navigation, and user friendliness.

Numerical computation methods entail the use of mathematical functions to compute website performance based on a number of aspects. For instance, Au Yeung and Law [1] measured the usability of Hong Kong's hotel websites in three industry segments via a numerical calculation process based on consumers' and professionals' evaluation results organized in five dimensions: language, layout and graphics, information architecture, user interface and navigation, and general. Additionally, Chung and Law [7] used mathematical functions to compute website performance of Hong Kong hotels in three industry segments using five dimensions: facilities information, customer contact information, reservations information, surrounding area information, and management of websites.

Some studies have also used different combinations of the previously identified website evaluation methods [19]. In the investigation of the website effectiveness of the U.S. limited-service chain lodging operations, Ham [10] combined counting and user judgment methods in the evaluation of 26 items grouped in the following seven evaluation criteria: impression, content usefulness, accuracy, navigation, accessibility, online reservations, and timeliness of information. Kline et al. [18] employed counting and automated methods in the evaluation of U.S. B&B websites using 41 items organized in four perspectives: user friendliness, site attractiveness, marketing effectiveness, and technical aspects. They found that larger hotels and those with higher quality rating had significantly more website features than their counterparts.

Overall, 13 out of the 26 peer reviewed hotel-website-quality-related studies identified up until March of 2012 have used counting evaluation methods, followed by combined (5), user judgment (3), numerical computation (3), automated (1), and no actual evaluation (1) methods. Moreover, hotel website evaluation is still in its early stages of development, and there are no commonly agreed-upon standards or techniques for the evaluation of hotel websites ([19]; [23]). However, there is a growing consensus among leading scholars in the area of hotel website performance that the views of hoteliers and hotel guests should be incorporated into any future website evaluations, as these groups are the ultimate suppliers and users of tourism websites.

To date, researchers interested in lodging website performance have been experimenting with different methodologies, and the BSC approach has been one of these ([18]; [20]; [23]; [24]). The BSC was developed by Kaplan and Norton ([15]; [16]) in response to a need to shift the focus from solely financial objectives to also include non-financial measures in evaluating business performance ([23]; [33]). It is a widely used strategic management tool that utilizes performance yardsticks from the financial, customer, business process, and technology perspectives to assess and manage

organizational performance [20]. By merging these different perspectives, the BSC affords managers a better understanding of the interrelationships and tradeoffs between competing performance dimensions and improves their decision making and problem solving outcomes [4]. Now, over 133 public and private sector organizations (of every size and spanning every industry) from around the globe use the BSC.

Although BSC does not evaluate all aspects of a hotel website, nor does it measure a website from every possible perspective, it forces website evaluators to consider multiple perspectives of website performance [23]. While the first tourism and hotel website evaluation study that used the BSC (i.e., Morrison et al. [24]) had its shortcomings – as acknowledged by its authors – these have been subsequently corrected to some extent through a modified BSC used in follow-up studies by Klein et al. [18], Morrison et al. [23], and Lee and Morrison [20].

The preceding brief overview suggests that the hotel website performance-related research – while small in number – is evolving. Moreover, all but one of the peer reviewed articles (i.e., Spremić & Strugar [29]) has focused on lodging establishments in developed and developing countries (e.g., Law et al. [19]; Morrison et al. [23]). Meanwhile, much less is known about hotels in transition economies.

3 DATA AND METHODOLOGY

To evaluate and analyze hotel websites, 197 hotels are included in a sample with the proportion of the category, type, size and region that corresponds to the total population.

The first objective of this study was to update and adapt a previously developed and validated instrument to evaluate the websites of hotels in a transition economy using the modified BSC approach. A two-page anonymous self-administered BSC instrument in Croatia was used for data gathering. A standard forward/backward translation procedure was followed. The modified BSC approach ([18]; [20]; [23]; [24]) was adopted as the overall framework for the evaluation process. As suggested by previous research, F&B ([11]; [13]; [17]; [18]; [20]) and other destination-related factors were added to the BSC. Namely, since tourism organizations at different levels can be involved in marketing a destination [32], a hotel should increase the amount of destination-related features on its website in an effort to partake in developing an image which will position its destination in the marketplace as a viable destination for visitors. While technical aspects are important in website evaluation, they were excluded from this study in order to accommodate the F&B and destination marketing perspectives.

Next, the BSC attributes were discussed with two hotel managers and their views were incorporated into the final instrument [7]. Altogether, four perspectives (i.e., user-friendliness, site attractiveness, marketing effectiveness, and F&B information availability) on the performance of hotel websites were evaluated. To reduce subjectivity, this study employed a dichotomous yes/no response for each of the 59 website attributes [12].

User-friendliness was evaluated with 12 yes/no items, site attractiveness with 8 yes/no items. Marketing effectiveness was measured using 33 yes/no items and six specific items of F&B information availability were evaluated with yes/no responses.

A group of 30 tourism and hospitality undergraduate students from a Croatian university were recruited to evaluate 197 hotel websites. Prior to website evaluations, all the evaluators attended a training session that provided specific instructions on how to use the BSC instrument. After the training phase, each evaluator was given a list containing websites. No two evaluators assessed the same website. Evaluations were conducted within the same computer laboratory during the same time frame. Throughout the Website evaluation process, two proctors were in the computer laboratory to assist the evaluators when questions arose with respect to the websites or measurement criteria.

Descriptive statistics included overall means for each of the four website performance perspectives. A non-parametric Friedman test was used to check whether differences among the four performance perspectives were significant. Furthermore, means for four website perspectives across all levels of independent variables: categorization, type, size and region are calculated and MANOVA is used to test the differences in all four website performance in relation to hotels' characteristics, and to test interaction effects. In the next step, based on the four website perspectives, hotels are classified and clusters are verified with ANOVA. So formed clusters were a base for verification of neural networks' predictive abilities.

4 EMPIRICAL RESULTS

The characteristics of lodgings in this study's sample mirror those in the population. That is, of the 197 lodging establishments, majority (52.3%) hold a 3-star quality rating and are located (80.7%) in Croatia's Adriatic (akin to coastal) region, 86.8% of the lodgings are hotels (type 1), and the rest of them are apart-hotels, apartments and tourist resorts (types 2, 3 and 4 respectively in Table 2). Most of the lodgings (63.5%) are big hotels (size 2 in Table 2; size 1 means small hotels). Due to representativeness of our sample, this study's results can be generalized to the population of lodgings in Croatia.

In this paper four components of the website performance are evaluated: user-friendliness, site attractiveness, marketing effectiveness and F&B informativeness. Table 1 shows overall means for the four perspectives. Site attractiveness had the highest overall mean (75) among the four perspectives; however hotels scored poorly on user-friendliness (48.6), marketing effectiveness (39.46) and F&B informativeness (14.3). Friedman's nonparametric test showed that there are significant differences among the four performance perspectives ($\chi^2(3)=369.789$, $p<0.01$), i.e. four perspectives are not equally present on lodgings' websites.

Table 1 Overall means for website perspectives with Friedman's test

User friendliness	Site attractiveness	Marketing effectiveness	F&B informativeness	$\chi^2(3)$
48.60%	75.00%	39.46%	14.30%	369.789***

*** <0.01 significance

While hoteliers focused heavily on their websites' aesthetic appearances, they neglected the web-based principles of user-friendliness, marketing, and F&B. This is a significant problem, since marketing, the availability of F&B information, and the website's ease of use all play an important role in the overall performance of a lodgings' website. Thus, hotels in Croatia need to center more on improving these three aspects of their websites.

Furthermore, means for four website perspectives across all levels of independent variables: categorization, type, size and region are presented in Table 2. MANOVA is used to test the differences in all four website performance in relation to hotels' characteristics, and to test interaction effects. Partial results are also presented in Table 2 pointing out the significance.

Table 2 Means for four website perspectives across all levels of independent variables with MANOVA significance results

Variable		User friendliness	Site attractiveness	Marketing effectiveness	F&B informativeness
Category	2	47,99	66,38*	35,01***	10,92
	3	46,36	75,97*	36,69***	12,14
	4	53,09	76,39*	43,60***	18,21
	5	49,24	81,82*	56,75***	24,24
Type	1	48,93	75,15	38,95	14,33
	2	48,33	75,00	43,64	16,67
	3	43,94	75,00	38,84	21,21
	4	48,33	72,50	46,67	5,00
Size	1	47,45	77,78	35,56	10,88
	2	49,27	73,40	41,70	16,27
Region	1	47,80	73,90*	38,96***	12,89**

	2	51,97	79,61*	41,55***	20,18**
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*** <0.01 significance, **<0.05 significance, *<0.1 significance

MANOVA test is significant in site attractiveness (in range from 66.38 for 2-star to 81.82 for 5-star hotel) and marketing effectiveness (in range from 35.01 for 2-star to 56.75 for 5-star hotel) considering the hotels' category. Thus, the more stars a hotel has, the higher overall quality of its website is. Furthermore, there are significant differences in site attractiveness (73.9 in Adriatic region and 79.61 in Continental region), marketing effectiveness (38.96 in Adriatic region and 41.55 in Continental region) and F&B information (12.89 in Adriatic region and 20.18 in Continental region) considering the region. This research revealed that lodging sites in continental Croatia have a significantly greater presence of site attractiveness, marketing effectiveness and F&B information than their counterparts in the Adriatic region.

There were also statistically significant differences in marketing effectiveness in the interaction between category and type; and significant differences in site attractiveness and marketing effectiveness in interaction between category and region.

Additionally, cluster analysis of the lodgings considering the four website perspectives is performed, with the goal to classify hotels in clusters with better and worse performances. Using hierarchical cluster analysis with Ward method and Euclid distance, two clusters are obtained with wanted performances (Table 3).

Table 3 Results of the cluster analysis with ANOVA significance results

Variable	Cluster		F-test	p-value
	1	2		
User friendliness	43,81	51,49	9,430	,002
Site attractiveness	47,30	91,67	430,185	,000
Marketing effectiveness	34,52	42,42	11,429	,001
F&B informativeness	9,91	16,94	6,026	,015
Number of units	74	123		

The differences between the two clusters (Table 3) regarding each of the four website perspectives are tested by ANOVA (F-test), which is more robust against variance homoscedacity than the similar t-test. Considering the significance of F-test for each perspective, the validity of cluster analysis is confirmed.

Since the new formed variable is dichotomy (1,2) the χ^2 -test can be performed between the new created variable and each of the four website perspectives individually. χ^2 -test shows that there is a significant relationship in only one case, between category of the hotel and cluster variable.

Finally, we attempted to classify hotels in two clusters with hotels' characteristics as factors with neural networks. The process started by dividing the sample of 197 hotels into three sets: training, testing and validation sample, which contain 69%, 12.2% and 18.8% of hotels respectively. The Multilayer perceptron (MLP) neural network is selected with one hidden layer, hyperbolic tangent activation function between input and hidden layer, and softmax function between hidden and output layer. After the network is trained, the best network is selected which contains 4 neurons in the hidden layer, i.e. MLP (12-4-2).

Confusion matrix shows the predicting ability of neural network model. In training sample neural network classified successfully 64% of hotels, in testing sample over 70% of hotels and in most important – validation (or the holdout) sample it forecasted properly over 62% of hotels. Overall neural network predicted 14 of all the hotels appropriately in the cluster one, and 113 out of all hotels in cluster two, i.e. altogether neural network predicted appropriately almost 65% of hotels in sample. 70 more hotels or 35% of hotels were mismatched. Therefore, it can be concluded that neural networks

have good prediction ability. However, it could be improved by modification of neural networks characteristics, i.e. number of hidden layers, number of hidden neurons or activation functions. Meanwhile, improving on neural networks' performance could be an important issue in the future researches. The results are shown in Table 4.

Table 4 Confusion matrix for training, testing and validation set with overall classification

Sample	Observed	Predicted		
		1	2	Percent Correct
Training (69%)	1	9	41	18,00%
	2	8	78	90,70%
	Overall Percent	12,50%	87,50%	64,00%
Testing (12.2%)	1	4	5	44,40%
	2	2	13	86,70%
	Overall Percent	25,00%	75,00%	70,80%
Validation (18.8%)	1	1	14	6,70%
	2	0	22	100,00%
	Overall Percent	2,70%	97,30%	62,20%
Overall	1	14	60	18,92%
	2	10	113	91,87%
	Overall Percent	12,18%	87,82%	64,47%

5 CONCLUSION

More and more hotels have their own website which suggests that their owners/managers recognize the importance of online presence. However, this study's main finding is that most hotels in Croatia are not effectively using websites from the user-friendliness, marketing effectiveness, and F&B informativeness perspectives. It appears that the Croatian hoteliers use their websites as electronic brochures, thus failing to communicate the unique selling points of both a hotel and a destination to its target audiences. Stated differently, there is much room for improvement in all three perspectives.

This research revealed that the more stars a hotel has, the higher overall quality of its website is, which did not come as a surprise. Moreover, lodging sites in continental Croatia have a significantly greater presence of site attractiveness, marketing effectiveness and F&B information than their counterparts in the Adriatic region. This finding comes as a surprise because one would expect hoteliers in the tourism-intensive Adriatic Croatia to place greater emphasis on website performance, as compared to the continental region. This paradox can perhaps be explained by Croatia's continuous overreliance on the sun and sea experience – and not much else. This research attempted to classify hotels into clusters with good and bad performances, and afterwards investigate the predictive abilities of neural networks in classifying these hotels. Cluster analysis gave expected results, and neural network model performed poorly on this data set with selected characteristics of neural networks. In future researches neural network results could be improved by changing these in advance set characteristics.

This study was limited to a website performance assessment by a group of trained evaluators, instead of actual tourists. Hence, future research should use a sample of actual travellers. Future studies should thus conduct more extensive website evaluation training sessions. Much like this study, future research should consider adding new attributes in each perspective to keep up with the continuously evolving technology. Because this is one of the very few tourism website evaluation studies in transition countries, more research is needed in various sectors that make up the tourism and hospitality phenomena in these economies. Finally, future studies should also measure the technical aspects of websites.

For hotels, web is one tool that can be of great assistance in building profitable customer relationships. Hotels should continuously monitor their websites' performance, enabling them to track the amount of business that their websites generate. The current study provides hoteliers with a website assessment tool that can serve as a point of comparison against contemporary e-marketing approaches.

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