



Maturity and development of high-quality restaurant websites: A comparison of Michelin-starred restaurants in France, Italy and Spain

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ABSTRACT

High-quality restaurants have become key assets in the economies of many countries and are often considered attractors of tourism in themselves. Therefore, the aim of this study is to propose a model to evaluate the development and maturity of restaurant websites. The model consists of a progressive analysis of the restaurants' websites, which starts with a content analysis, and continues with the application of the eMICA model to identify each website's level of maturity. It finishes with a PCA integrating both methods. This model is applied to 980 Michelin-starred restaurants in France, Italy and Spain to determine whether their websites facilitate efficient communication and are adapted to e-commerce. Results show that website maturity and content development are positively related, and that the aforementioned restaurants are not taking advantage of the opportunities that the Internet offers, and show different progress depending on the country where they are located and the category.

1. Introduction

The emergence of information and communication technologies (ICTs) in general and the Internet in particular has influenced the way companies are managed and compete, with the tourism industry being one of those most affected and where the adoption process has been more widespread (Dijkmans et al., 2015). One of the biggest impacts ICTs have had has been on how tourism companies distribute their products (Buhalis and Law, 2008; O'Connor and Frew, 2000).

Consequently, and as a result of this new scenario, consumers are increasingly using the Internet as a source of information regarding tourism products and services, such as hotel reservations, car rental, flights or tourism packages (Cristobal-Fransi et al., 2013; Eurobarometer, 2016). At the same time, the proportion of accommodation and travel contracted via the Internet is also increasing (Hua and Hua, 2016; Litvin et al., 2008). While ICT use has had a particular impact on innovation in the tourism sector, leading to new product research and development (Hjalager, 2010), it must be borne in mind that innovation is not only achieved by incorporating technology, but also by managing it correctly. At the level of tourism service user behavior, individuals' buying and consumption habits have also been influenced by new technologies (Filieri and McLeay, 2014; Kim and Fesenmaier, 2008). In fact, the Internet allows the consumer to be more and more demanding and better informed, and therefore to increasingly

manage their own travel independently (Law and Bai, 2008). The gastronomy sector is no stranger to this phenomenon. This type of tourism can therefore be considered a form of niche or alternative tourism in the face of an increasingly competitive market, and one that seeks to satisfy travelers' thirst for new experiences (Du Rand and Heath, 2006).

The consumption and enjoyment of food and wine is gaining in importance in the tourism sector (Olivieri and Giraldo, 2015; Santich, 2004) and there are now travelers who consider going to a particular geographical area to eat and learn about the region's cuisine (Byrd et al., 2016). This can even be a main motivation for food lovers to travel (López-Guzmán and Margarida, 2011). Cooking schools, traditional gastronomic festivals and celebrations, help with the harvest or visiting regional wineries are also considered alternative types of gastronomic tourism (Santich, 2004).

However, even if food is sometimes not the main reason for travel, it is still considered an important element and therefore one of the fundamental aspects to be taken into account in promoting a specific geographical area (López-Guzmán and Margarida, 2011). In the European Union, those countries with the highest expenditure per capita in terms of dining out are those who consider food as part of their lifestyle. The most notable countries in this sense are France, Italy and Spain.

If we focus on restaurants we can say that it is one of the sectors that has been most affected by Internet innovation (Miranda et al., 2015).

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Information search plays a very important role in consumer restaurant selection and decision-making (Yilmaz and Gultekin, 2016). Restaurant websites are considered one of the most important information sources, which may create positive or negative perceptions about restaurants and induce consumers to visit them (Yilmaz and Gultekin, 2016). In this respect, many restaurants wanting to establish their presence on the Net have developed websites aimed at informing consumers about the products and services they offer (Hak-Seon et al., 2012). However, restaurants that do not provide the desired information quickly and easily may find that their website is ignored by Internet users (Rosalin et al., 2016). Thus, restaurant owners need to address the question of how best to combine ICTs and the Internet within their marketing mix (Kang and Namkung, 2016; Namkung et al., 2007). To this end, they must take on a more direct role, providing customers not only with the exact information they need and when they need it, but also providing additional resources where they can interact with the customer (Kimes, 2008). Moreover, in certain types of restaurants, such as the Michelin-starred ones, the website is the most important source of information along with the restaurant's reputation, recommendations from friends, recent reviews, and rating in food guides (Yilmaz and Gultekin, 2016).

Understanding the impact of content development on restaurant websites, influencing consumers' search for information and decision-making, and level of customer interaction is crucial to the effective construction of websites. Having highlighted the significant influence information and communication technologies exert on the management of tourism companies in general and the restaurant sector in particular, we consider there is a need to evaluate the content development and level of maturity of restaurant websites, given their importance to the region and the economy. However, to the best of our knowledge, few studies have identified these aspects from a marketing perspective and with a high level of detail in the gastronomic sector.

Therefore, the aim of this study is to propose a model for evaluating restaurant websites developed combining two different methods: Web content analysis (WCA) based on four content categories; Information, Communication, e-Commerce and Additional Values; and the analysis of the level of maturity with regard to electronic commerce, based on the extended model of Internet commerce adoption (eMICA). The proposed model combines the eMICA technique for maturity, and web content analysis for development. The integration of both methods of analysis is done by principal component analysis (PCA), and the objective of the integrated model is to obtain not only the static information provided by the heuristic analysis of the website content, but also the degree of maturity which is most related to the purchasing process. Integrating the features of the eMICA and web content analysis in a single model allows researchers to know how wide a website is, what to improve and emphasize to reach potential users, as well as to adapt to what they demand, in terms of information, interaction and online purchasing. Furthermore, we also aim to contribute with a sound model that evaluates websites belonging to any type of restaurant, from a premium five-star restaurant, to a fast food restaurant or from an international one to a domestic one, regardless of where they are located or the award or classification obtained.

The proposed model is applied to data examining and analyzing differentiated strategies used by websites of high-quality restaurants in the three countries with the highest per capita expenditure on dining out in the European Union: France, Italy and Spain, selecting Michelin-starred restaurants as our sample and case study.

The article is structured as follow. Following the introduction, a theoretical background section presents the methods traditionally used to analyze website information. Next, in the methods section we present the integrative model, the analyses carried out and the case study. This is followed by the results section, in which we expose the results of the tools used as well as the integrated results of the model. Finally, the conclusions section includes the main contributions, as well as the limitations and suggested further research.

2. Theoretical background

Due to the immense importance of an organization's website as an element of its communication and representation, developing a suitable system for evaluating the ideal characteristics of a website is of great interest to researchers and professionals alike. After reviewing the literature, we found that different authors corroborate the lack of a universally recognized methodology designed for this purpose (Baggio et al., 2011; Fernández-Cavia et al., 2014; Law et al., 2010).

The most frequent research methods with regard to evaluating websites are mainly based on surveys, experimental evaluation and content analysis (Chiou et al., 2010). According to Law et al. (2010), the methodological approaches most used in research on website measurement in tourism are divided into five different types: 1) counting; 2) user judgment; 3) automated method; 4) numerical computation; and 5) combined method.

A counting method is used to evaluate a website's performance or to determine its content richness. It has the following requirements: first, a checklist to verify the existence of attributes on a website, and second, a group of people is needed to do the actual counting in a laboratory. This method was one of the most adopted instruments to evaluate websites (Law et al., 2010).

User judgment methods evaluate user satisfaction or perceptions. These users could be any combinations of academic researchers, industrial practitioners, policymakers, and consumers. Automated methods involve the evaluation of websites using different software systems such as content mining or web usage mining tools. Numerical computation methods use mathematical functions to compute tourism website performance based on a number of characteristics, usually represented by a set of numerical scores. Finally, researchers can also use different combinations of website evaluation methods (Chiou et al., 2010; Law et al., 2010).

Nowadays, new evaluation methods are emerging such as neuroscientific tools (Bigné, 2016; Brocke et al., 2013). A set of techniques from eye tracking, face reading, galvanic skin conductance, electroencephalogram signals (EEG), positron emission tomography (PET) to functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) are applied to evaluate different aspects in tourist sector (Bigné et al., 2016).

As regards the approach of analysis, a large number of studies refer to a series of indicators that can be grouped into four main types: technical, commercial, content-related and design-related (Chiou et al., 2010; Cristobal-Fransi, 2006; Fernández-Cavia et al., 2014; González-López et al., 2013). From the perspective of market orientation, websites are evaluated by identifying users as potential customers, meaning that evaluators focus more on aspects related to promoting activities, online transactions and details of products and services (Álvarez, 2014). We chose to use this research perspective in this study.

In the field of tourism, websites from different sectors have been analyzed in depth, including those belonging to destination marketing organizations (DMOs) (Del Vasto-Terrientes et al., 2015; Fernández-Cavia et al., 2014; Költringer and Dickinger, 2015), hotels (Ting et al., 2013), travel agencies (Carstens and Patterson, 2005; Cao and Yang, 2016), means of transport (Ellinger et al., 2003), ski resorts (Daries et al., 2016), and even restaurants (Johnson et al., 2005; Miranda et al., 2015; Moreo et al., 2007).

Gastronomy, in general, and top restaurants in particular, have become a major tourist attraction, and are becoming one of the primary reasons that tourists choose the destination of their trip (Miranda et al., 2015). However, the high-quality restaurant sector is yet to be explored.

2.1. Website content analysis (WCA)

Website content has been found to be one of the main factors contributing to repeat visits to a destination or business (Cao and Yang, 2016). It tends to be evaluated using the information available on the

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