

Interactivity as a key factor in city website visibility and place brand communication

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Abstract

One of the most important tools in communicating cities or places and their brands is a website with visibility, typically measured by the number of inbound links in a website. The more visible a website is, the more likely it is to receive visits. The aim of this study is to demonstrate empirically that interactivity is a key factor in maximizing the visibility of city websites. Our results show that user-administrator and user-user interactivity, more so than user-message interactivity, increase the number of inbound links, thereby enhancing website visibility. However, few websites have a well developed interactivity of the former two types.

Our conclusion is that place websites are more likely to be successful if they include more resources of this type, such as chats or virtual communities.

Keywords: Website, city, place brand, interactivity, visibility, usability.

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1. Introduction

The internet is becoming increasingly important in communicating commercial brands in general and place brands in particular. In the same way as it is essential for major commercial brands to be adequately represented on the internet, place brands need to determine the right strategy in terms of presence, positioning and visibility.

For both commercial and place brands the most effective tool for achieving web presence, positioning and visibility is to create and maintain a website. The question is, however, to decide on a format for a place brand website that attracts attention and that maximizes the number of visitors, investors, students and residents.

This study is based on three premises:

- a. Since the best commercial brand websites are the most advanced, both in technical and communicative terms, these should serve as guides and models for place brand websites.
- b. Early websites focused on usability and ease of navigation. Currently, and although there is room for improvement, the usability level of commercial brand and major place brand websites is acceptable and relatively uniform across the board. Where websites tend to differ is in the level of interactivity and the correct communication of a brand image which is uniform and relevant to the user.
- c. Internet users are increasingly demanding more active participation in websites and interactivity possibilities make a place brand more appealing to users.

Our study, based on this last hypothesis, aims to demonstrate empirically that interactivity is a key factor in the visibility of place websites though it has still not been fully exploited.

2. Conceptual background

Websites are the most important communication format for commercial brands on the internet. As well as providing culturally adapted information in an orderly and personalized fashion in quantities impossible by other means, websites create virtual product experiences (Klein, 2003), build brand image (Hollis, 2005) and can be used for sales promotion, direct marketing, advertising and public relations (Cho & Cheon, 2005).

For place or city marketing organizations, websites are fundamental communication tools (Palmer, 2005). More than just informational tools, they can be used to persuade, convince, aid decision making and even provide customers with facilities for making reservations and purchases. In the city's market, websites are key instruments for enhancing competitiveness.

City website design, images and interactive resources transmit tangible, intangible and emotional values that come to be associated with the place, and these values ultimately influence the decisions and behaviours that affect the economic development of a place (Hosany, Ekinci & Uysal, 2006).

Various studies of websites have demonstrated that usability is a key aspect of successful websites (Nielsen, 2000; 2006) and of brand-image building. Users have a more positive image of, and attitude towards, sites that are easy to open, browse and use—or that are perceived to be easier to open, browse and use (Chen & Wells, 1999; Chen et al., 2002; Heijden, 2003). Compact sites with basic, user-friendly iconography tend to create a good brand image, whereas extensive and complicated sites with a confusing internal structure and that load slowly create attitudes that are less positive and possibly even negative.

In the same vein, Spool's studies (1996; 2002) comparing websites demonstrated that the usability of a website significantly and positively affects the brand and the branding process, demonstrating that when users can browse a website easily and find the information they want quickly, a better impression is obtained of the brand and expectations are better met. In short, obstacles to browsing directly and negatively affect brand perception.

Other studies (Sicilia, Ruiz & Munuera, 2005; Ko, Cho & Roberts, 2005) have demonstrated that interactivity is another important variable in the promotion of brands through websites. More interactive websites provide better information processing, generate positive attitudes toward the website, product and brand, and generate purchase intentions. Interactivity is also a key element for creating the emotional bond that all brands need to build with customers.

The analysis in this study is based on Cho & Cheon's (2005) concept of interactivity as broken down into three areas: user-message interactivity, user-administrator interactivity and user-user interactivity. User-message interactivity refers to the extent users can personalise their relationship with website content to suit their own interests and motivation. User-administrator interactivity, which deals with communications between website users and those who organize or are responsible for content, can be two-way: from the user to the administrator (enquiries, suggestions and complaints) and from the administrator to the user (obtaining personal details from users, replying to enquiries, etc). User-user interactivity refers to the possibility for interaction between users who access a website via virtual communities, chats, forums, etc. This type of interactive communication, which is also called Web 2.0 or word-of-mouth, is covered in depth below, given its importance and influence for websites in general and for city or place websites in particular.

Nowadays communication is changing and the one-way communication model via fixed channels is being superseded by an interactive and dynamic process in which users select, form and discuss new experiences (Molenaar, 2002). Users have gone from being passive receivers of information to also being communicators who even interact with other users. Thanks to the internet, consumers obtain information and learn from online messages and from the knowledge and experiences of other users who have become communicators (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2000:80). Website consumers or users are thus co-creators who are unwilling to accept experiences as manufactured by companies and place marketing organizations; rather, users want to be able to change

and shape experiences, whether by themselves or via the experience of other consumers (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2000:83).

User-user interactivity or social interaction, which is one of the most popular applications of the new technologies, occurs through click-to-talk software, online forums, virtual communities, instant messaging, free webmail and blogs. There is a range of concepts, definitions and names for this user communication phenomenon. Some researchers call it 'product review', others 'word-of-mouth'; it is also referred to as Communication 2.0 or user-to-user communication. Common to all these concepts is interpersonal and interactive communication between individuals who do not belong to the promotional or commercial organization represented by the website. Litvin, Goldsmith & Pan (2008) define it as communication about a product, service or company between consumers in which the sources are unaffected by commercial influence.

Early studies demonstrated the strong influence of the opinions of other users in decision making on tourist products compared to commercial information. The experiences of other users has a bearing on decision making because user experiences are perceived as providing objective information about a product (Ricci & Wietsma, 2006). In a similar vein, Saranow (2004) has demonstrated how travel blogs influence decision making by users and tourists. For tourist destination websites, user opinions and experiences affect other users' decision to visit particular destinations.

However, despite the importance of the opinions and experiences of other travellers in the decision to visit a place, very few official place websites currently facilitate user-to-user interaction.

Finally, the concept of website visibility is frequently referred to as the number of external links a website has. Visibility is an indirect yardstick of a website's success in that it provides a quantitative measure of web presence. The more visible a website is, the more likely it is to receive visits, as it indicates that the website has stirred enough interest for administrators of other websites to create a link to it.

Since visibility is a key cybermetric indicator, it was correlated in this study with the usability and interactivity variables, with the aim being to determine the variables that are most likely to enhance the success of place websites.

3. Hypotheses and methodology

The main aim of this study was to analyse the usability and the interactivity of websites for selected major tourist destination cities and determine the importance of usability and interactivity in terms of enhancing the visibility of the websites.

The study was carried out in two stages. The first stage analysed the usability and interactivity of selected tourist websites to determine their level of development and how these variables were addressed. The second stage involved correlating these

variables with the number of inbound links to determine the importance of usability and interactivity for website visibility.

An analysis template from the World Tourism Organization (WTO, 1999) was used for the first stage of this quantitative empirical study. This template was expanded in two ways. Firstly, in view of the contributions of recent studies (McMillan, 2003; Liu, 2003; Cho & Cheon, 2005), it included the newly created interactive indicators that began to appear in place websites around the time we conducted our study. Secondly, the template also included other aspects such as e-commerce and databases compiled from user information and other information not foreseen in the initial template.

Forty official websites for major tourist cities around the world were analysed, although the study could also feasibly have been carried out using websites for regions, countries or smaller locations. The sample drew on a ranking of major tourist cities based on the WTO's world's top tourism destinations list and the importance of the cities as tourist destinations.

A total of 135 indicators were used, 70 of which were directly representative of the usability and interactivity variables analysed. The three aspects of interactivity mentioned in Section 2.2 were analysed, namely, user-message interaction, user-administrator interaction and user-user interaction. The analysis in this first stage of the study, conducted using the SPSS statistical software, focused on descriptive statistics.

The second stage of the study focused on measuring visibility by means of link indexing. The home pages of the city websites were analysed in Yahoo to extract data on inbound links. Inbound links from the following three Web 2.0 services were also analysed:

- Delicious (bookmark service)
- Google Blogs (blog search engine)
- Technorati (blog search engine).

Data obtained from these services are especially relevant as links from blogs and bookmark services indicate user interest in writing a comment about a website or in saving a website's URL for future visits.

Internet search engines (primarily Yahoo) were used to obtain and quantify data by running search equations in which all the sites that contained a link to the website were analysed. This following search for the website of the Universitat Pompeu Fabra is an example of this type of search:

linkdomain: www.upf.edu

site:www.upf.edu

The second part of the equations removed any links that came from within the website itself, given that such links are aimed at facilitating internal browsing and so are not relevant to calculating visibility.

The data for the study was obtained using DigiDocSpider, a tracker program created by the authors. From the home page URL, this program analyses website pages using

regular expressions in order to extract specific HTML code elements. DigiDocSpider can also send the pages to validation services available on the internet (XHTML, CSS, accessibility, etc), retrieve the results of these external analyses and incorporate them in its database. DigiDocSpider automatically compiles more than 100 indicators for each of the websites, analysed in terms of three aspects: accessibility, search engine ranking and XHTML code quality.

Once these two stages of the study were complete, the usability and interactivity indices were correlated with the inbound link indices to determine if the more usable or interactive websites received more external links and were, therefore, more visible. SPSS was also used for this analysis, and gamma was used as the correlation index.

4. Results

4.1. Level of usability of the websites analysed

Most of the sites analysed in the study had very high usability indices, which indicated that the websites were generally well designed and easy to use. Particularly high percentages were found for variables related to website structure, usability and browsability.

Table 1. Usability indices

Usability indices	Frequency	Percentage
List of contents on	36	90.0%

all pages		
Link with home page on all pages	37	92.5%
External links to related sites	38	95.0%
Up-to-date information	39	97.5%
Website map	23	57.5%
Displayed navigation path	16	40.0%

Source: Compiled by the authors

As shown in Table 1, most of the sites analysed had a site contents list displayed on all their web pages and a link to the home page from each web page. These two resources ensure user orientation within the website, as they make the structure of the site clear and simplify website use. Nearly all the websites had external links to related websites providing complementary services and information to users. Some websites provided links to official city council and other institution websites. Others advertised services, like Barcelona's website, where users can buy tickets to shows.

With respect to help options offered by the websites to users, 90% of the sites analysed provide contact by e-mail and 67.5% provided a telephone number for enquiries; only one website offered help via chat, and no website made use of web calls (calls made by the destination marketing managers) or human clicks (real time communication between a visitor to the website and website administrators).

On the whole, the results up to this point demonstrate that most websites were well structured and designed, facilitate browsing and had a high degree of usability.

Table 2 lists the most and least usable websites and their scores.

Table 2. Website usability scores

Most usable websites		Least usable websites	
Score	City website	Score	City website
11	London	5	Cairo
11	Hong Kong	5	Beijing
10	Bangkok	6	Lisbon
10	Budapest		
10	Sydney		
10	Amsterdam		
10	Tokyo		
10	Buenos Aires		
10	Mexico City		

Source: Compiled by the authors

4.2. Level of interactivity of the websites analysed

The interactivity variable was analysed in terms of user-message interaction, user-administrator interaction and user-user interaction.

4.2.1. User-message interactivity

Most of the websites analysed used far more user-message interaction resources than user-administrator or user-user interaction resources, meaning that the websites offered users greater interactivity with the messages that they wanted to transmit than with destination marketing staff or other users. The user-message interaction resources with the highest percentage of use were interactive trip organizers.

Table 3. Interactive trip-organizer resources on websites

		Frequency	Percentage
Interactive trip-organizers (no purchase permitted)	How to get there	33	82.5%
	What to do	39	97.5%
	Attractions/events	38	95.0%
	Leisure activities	38	95.0%
	Cultural activities	37	92.5%
	Where to stay	38	95.0%
	Getting around	39	97.5%
	Excursions	33	82.5%
	Rentals	16	40.0%

Source: Compiled by the authors

Table 3 shows that most of the websites analysed offered interactive trip organizer services (with no purchase possible), aimed at helping users plan trips by providing them with large amounts of information that users could adapt to their needs and interests.

Very few of the websites analysed used other user-message interactive resources, however. Of the 40 websites analysed, 62.5% provided maps of their cities to guide users and 82.5% provided geographical markers and zoom options for users to search for and display map elements in detail. However, only three of the websites gave users the option to personalize the front page; only four websites provided online virtual excursions or games for children; and only five websites offered virtual flights over the city or allowed users create their own virtual brochures for saving in folders with personalized information.

Information services that could be downloaded to mobile phones—such as underground transport maps, information on sights and monuments or audio files—were rarely available on the websites analysed. As well as providing useful information, such interactive resources are entertaining for website users and ultimately make a website more appealing and interesting.

4.2.2. User-administrator interactivity

User-administrator interaction resources were used less frequently than user-message interaction resources on the websites analysed, 35% of which provided online ordering

and reservation options and 32.5% of which enabled users to track orders online. Users normally had to register and provide the websites with personal information in order to use these two resources. Of the forty websites analysed, 22.5% offered users the option of filling in surveys and opinion forms and 12.5% provided a complaint forms.

Other user-administrator interactive resources were hardly used at all by the websites analysed. For example, only the Rome website provided an option to ask questions about the city, its services and the company responsible for destination marketing; only the Dublin and Istanbul sites had digital notice boards available for use by website visitors; and only the Madrid, Amsterdam and Montreal sites gave users the option to sponsor their website.

None of the websites analysed offered users the chance to propose new products and services or to chat with marketing agents, nor did any of them provide call-me buttons in which users could select a time zone and language for promotional staff to call them by telephone and provide them with information.

4.2.3. User-user interactivity

Relatively little use was made of user-user interaction resources. The most used resource of this type was electronic postcard, which was offered by 40% of the websites analysed, with 37.5% of these sites not requiring user registration. This resource, mostly used by younger users, is becoming more typical in place websites. It enables users to

send messages online and so avoid the inconvenience and costs of traditional mail (postage, time spent going to the post office, etc).

Only the Krakow site provided a user-chat facility, and only the Hong Kong, Rome and Toronto sites gave users the option to recount stories and experiences and provide summaries. None of the websites had cyber-clubs—which would enable destination marketers to create client fidelity programmes by providing special offers and discounts—or cyber-communities of users with common interests—which would put users in touch with each other, increase their knowledge and interest, and make them feel more confident and informed about their common interests.

This research demonstrates an enormous imbalance in the use of different kinds of interactive resources by official place websites. User-message interaction resources are the most typical resources—in particular, interactive trip organizers. On the whole, use of interactive resources is still quite low, especially user-administrator and user-user interaction resources. These results concur with the conclusions of a study by Antón (2004) on the web presence of major tourist destinations on the Spanish Mediterranean coast, which highlighted the absence of website tools for promoting interactivity, such as web forms and visitor comment pages.

Table 4 shows the websites with the highest and lowest interactivity scores.

Table 4. Website interactivity scores

Most interactive websites	Least interactive websites
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Score	City websites	Score	City websites
28	Dublin	4	Moscow
23	Hong Kong	4	Kiev
21	Valencia	7	Sydney
20	Madrid	8	Cairo
18	Berlin	8	Seville
18	Istanbul		
18	Rome		

Source: Compiled by the authors

4.3. Usability and interactivity correlation with visibility

In our analysis of the correlation between the two variables analysed and inbound links (visibility) no correlation was found between visibility and usability. However, we did find that visibility and interactivity were correlated—particularly user-administrator and user-user interactivity. Thus, the most usable sites were not those with the most inbound links nor were these websites the most visible.

There was, however, a moderate ($r=0.35$) and significant ($p<0.000$) correlation between interactivity and the Technorati attention index, indicating a relationship between website interactivity and the number of inbound links detected by the Technorati search engine, as the more interactive a site is, the more often it is cited in

blogs. This result suggests that websites offering more interactive resources were more popular amongst users.

Table 5. Correlation between interactivity and Technorati links

Interactivity		Value	Asymptotic standard error ^(a)	Approximate T ^(b)	Approximate significance
Technorati links					
Ordinal by ordinal	Gamma	.353	.100	3.494	.000
No. of valid cases		40			

^(a) Assuming the alternative hypothesis.

^(b) Using the asymptotic standard error assuming the null hypothesis.

Source: Compiled by the authors

Differences can be observed when the correlation with interactivity is broken down according to kind of interactivity. Thus, correlation occurs with user-administrator interactivity and with user-user interactivity, but not with user-message interactivity. These results reveal how sites with greater quantities of interactive resources that foster user-user or user-administrator communications had more inbound links, indicating that two-way communication and Web 2.0 are important factors in the success of city websites.

Table 6. Correlation between user-administrator interactivity and link indexing

User-administrator interactivity	Value	Asymptotic standard	Approximate T ^(b)	Approximate significance

			error ^(a)		
Delicious links Ordinal by ordinal	Gamma	.371	.143	2.502	.012
No. of valid cases		40			
Google links Ordinal by ordinal	Gamma	.358	.134	2.563	.010
No. of valid cases		40			
Technorati links Ordinal by ordinal	Gamma	.202	.130	1.531	.126
No. of valid cases		40			

^(a) Assuming the alternative hypothesis.

^(b) Using the asymptotic standard error assuming the null hypothesis.

Source: Compiled by the authors

As Table 6 shows, websites with more user-administrator interactivity resources had higher Delicious, Google and Technorati indices. Likewise, the websites with greater quantities of interactive user-user communication resources—chats, blogs, etc—had more links in Yahoo and Technorati, indicating that websites offering users the option to interact with each other were more visible.

Table 7. Correlation between user-user interactivity and link indexing

User-user interactivity		Value	Asymptotic standard error ^(a)	Approximate T ^(b)	Approximate significance
Yahoo links	Gamma	.423	.160	2.452	.014
Ordinal by ordinal					
No. of valid cases		40			
Technorati links	Gamma	.389	.153	2.365	.018
Ordinal by ordinal					
No. of valid cases		40			

^(a) Assuming the alternative hypothesis.

^(b) Using the asymptotic standard error assuming the null hypothesis.

Source: Compiled by the authors

5. Conclusions

As our results show, user-user interactivity (the possibility for user and even website administrator opinions to be shared and appear on a website) is a decisive factor in the number of inbound links to a website, which, in turn, enhance its visibility and success. Our results are correlated by previous studies that conclude that user-user interaction or Web 2.0 have a bearing on the perceptions of place brand and decision making processes of potential consumers in the tourist sector, making even more patent the need to include these resources in place websites.

Communication between users is crucial in the place brand because consumers perceive tourism to be a high-risk purchase (Lewis & Chambers, 2000) but cannot test tourist services beforehand (Senecal & Nantal, 2004; Buhalis, 2003). Potential tourists perceive the opinion and experiences of others to be a valuable source of information that reduces the sensation of risk and of venturing into the unknown.

The experiences of other tourists, investors and residents have an influence on decision making processes because of their experiential nature. Positive anecdotes from other users, especially when they include enthusiastic comments and photographs, are more motivational and convincing than a brochure or information. Since consumers buy an experience rather than a product, learning of the experiences of other users helps them plan and imagine their own trips (Henning-Thurau et al., 2004; Senecal & Nantal, 2004).

Despite the influence of two-way personal communication and the opinions and experiences of other tourists, investors and residents—as demonstrated above—very few official place websites offer interactive resources to users. When this study was conducted, only the Krakow website had a chat option for users and only the Hong Kong, Rome and Toronto sites offered users the chance to recount and share their travel experiences (although since the study was concluded, Web 2.0 interactive resources have been incorporated into some of the sites analysed, such as the Madrid 4u blog added to the Madrid site). We can not explain the reasons why this is, but may be one of them is that the city marketers are afraid of negative comments, criticism or loss of control of information. These are some of the main problems in the application of Web

2.0 in all fields. There is still some reluctance by organizations to allow and encourage the free flow of views among users.

To make place websites more visible and successful, it is recommended that city websites incorporate more user-administrator and user-user interactivity resources. Some of these resources are the possibility of online ordering and reservation, of offering users the option of filling in surveys, opinion forms and complaint forms, of asking questions about the city and its services, of sponsoring the website, the chance to propose new products and services or to chat with marketing agents. It is recommended that city websites have digital notice boards for use by website visitors, call-me buttons for promotional staff to contact users by telephone to provide them with information. It is also recommended to have got chats, spaces for posting photos and describing experiences, cyber-clubs which would enable destination marketers to create client friendly programmes by providing special offers and discounts and virtual communities to discuss subjects of interest among them.

6. Further research

The study has analysed the 40 official websites for major tourist cities around the world, because it is assumed they have more interactive resources in their websites. Further research should be conducted to find out what results are produced by smaller destinations. It would also be interesting to measure what is the users' real demand for user-user interactivity.

7. Acknowledgements

This research work has been partially funded by the “New advertising and promotion strategies of Spanish tourism brands on the web” project (CSO 2008-02627), of the Ministry of Science and Innovation of the Spanish Government. More information can be found at www.marcasturisticas.org (available only in Spanish).

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