Good, Better, Best Practise –
A Comparative Analysis of Official Destination Websites

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Abstract

The uplifting financial impact that tourism may have on local and global economies of scale has resulted in tourists becoming a highly sought-after commodity capable of turning almost any tourism destination and its attractions into thriving exports. With the rapid evolution of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) and the introduction of smart technologies in particular, however, tourism has become not only more accessible, but arguably also more competitive with an online, try-before-you-buy tourism experience now becoming a reality. Subsequently, the battle is no longer for top offline destination only, but also for online destination of choice. An opportunity thus exists for Official Destination Websites (ODWs) to take advantage of these, and additional opportunities, to enhance a prospective tourist's online, pre-tourism experience. By analysing seven of the world's most popular destinations' capital city ODWs, one comes to realise that ODWs have become an integrated, rather than independent, part of facilitating tourism. As such, the importance of developing, implementing and maintaining an ODW to increase the likelihood of a possible tourist conversion from mere browser to buyer is highlighted. Finally, the similarities and differences between the analysed ODWs are also listed in an attempt to guide prospective tourism destinations in their endeavour to establish a new ODW, as well as allowing destinations with an existing ODW to possibly implement improvements.

Keywords: E-Tourism; Tourism Websites; Official Destination Websites; Online Tourism; Web Development.

Introduction

The uplifting financial impact that tourism may have on local and global economies of scale has resulted in tourists becoming a highly sought-after commodity capable of turning almost any tourism destination and its attractions into thriving exports (Shahzad, Shahbaz, Ferrer and Kumar, 2017; U.S. Travel Association, 2012). Tourism is thus a prime source of foreign exchange earnings which, in turn, can reduce the deficit in a country's balance of payments (Shahzad et al., 2017). With the proliferation of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) affecting not only society, business and people in everyday contexts, but also tourism (Gretzel, Zhong and Koo, 2016), prospective tourism destinations no longer have to rely only on traditional approaches such as word of mouth, postal correspondence or print advertisements to stimulate new tourism interest. Instead, prospective destinations may harvest the borderless nature of the internet to reach a global audience of potential tourists, right in the comfort of their own homes.

While various free, internet-based (online) marketing methods, such as distributing digital newsletters, publishing a blog, creating and maintaining social network profiles or registering on third party (partner) travel websites may be chosen to create an online presence, an official, dedicated destination website has the ability to act as a central point of reference for all online activities.

By centralising digital activities and information on an official destination website (ODW), end users are afforded the opportunity to curate their own digital communication preferences and pursue further contact through their own preferred online channels and platforms. ODWs and their associated content may thus become a prospective tourist's online destination of choice, before the promoted, physical destination subsequently then becomes their offline destination of choice. With online destination browsing arguably thus preceding buying into the offline tourism experience, great emphasis should be placed on the development, implementation and maintenance of an ODW to increase the likelihood of a possible tourist conversion from mere browser to buyer.

Although academic researchers have long advocated the importance of assessing website effectiveness through the introduction of evaluations, frameworks and statistical analysis techniques (Law, Qi and Buhalis, 2010), the core focus of many of these approaches, however, has been on evaluating an overall website experience as opposed to identifying trends and making recommendations pertaining specifically to website features and functionalities. This places destinations that have not yet implemented such an ODW at a disadvantage as they have no content to evaluate or analyse yet, but are not guided in which features or functionality to include on their ODW, should they choose to implement one, either.

Furthermore, as there is no single, standard format to house or display the diversity of destination information available, building effective recommendation systems, such as ODWs, within the tourism domain can be an extremely challenging task (Fesenmaier, Kuflik and Neidhardt, 2016). In response to this, this paper focuses on analysing some of the top tourism destinations in the world (based on 2016 results per country), firstly evaluating whether they have an online presence in the form of an ODW, and secondly, identifying which features and functionalities are present on this ODW. By comparing and contrasting the various ODWs, we take note of their differences and similarities, also attempting to identify trends. Based on this discussion we proceed by making recommendations that can be used by current and future tourism destinations with the implementation and development of such an ODW (from scratch), or making improvements to an existing ODW (by incorporating additional features/functionality). In the long run, this may assist current and prospective tourism destinations in competing for tourists in the online environment, possibly also increasing their likelihood of becoming an online, browsing tourist's, offline, physical destination of choice.

To begin with, understanding digital device usage for tourism and the role that technology has played in transforming the tourism industry to now include an online, almost pre-tourism experience, are discussed in greater detail below.

Digital Device Usage and Tourism

With ICTs having become an integrated part of many facets of everyday life, end users may now make use of numerous kinds of digital devices to access a plethora of online information in addition to products and services, at any time of the day or night, from almost anywhere in the world. These devices differ greatly in size, screen real estate, computing power, portability and price (to mention only a few), and range from traditional desktop computers to laptops, tablets, phablets, smartphones and in some cases also wearable devices.

With each device comes a different kind of preferred usage environment, interaction and input method(s), subsequently also influencing a user's overall behaviour. In the context of tourism specifically, tourists that make use of their smartphones while travelling have been observed to exhibit changes in behavioural and emotional states due to the instant informational access on their smartphones facilitating effective problem solving (Wang, Park and Fesenmaier, 2012).

While smartphone use for instant information access may be noticeably more popular and convenient during activities such as travelling, many end users may prefer to make use of their

larger, less mobile devices such as desktops, laptops and tablets, to conduct more comprehensive review and purchasing activities (Chaffey, 2017). End users may thus adopt a multi-platform approach whereby different devices are used in different environments, although the same resource, such as an ODW for example, may be accessed from all of these different devices. Prospective tourism destinations looking to implement an ODW should therefore aim to provide a seamless experience across different types of devices, thereby increasing overall accessibility and exposure of their ODW. A more in-depth discussion on this concept follows next.

Official Destination Websites (ODWs) and the Online Tourism Experience

With ODWs being capable of providing an online, almost pre-tourism experience of an offline destination to potential tourists, ODWs can be seen to be playing an integrated, rather than independent role, in facilitating tourism. Taking into consideration the vast differences in device specifications of an online tourist's chosen device that may be used to access such an ODW however, visibility, accessibility and content delivery have been identified as key aspects to consider when attempting to reach and accommodate the largest possible audience (Louw and Von Solms, 2016).

While visibility firstly suggests a domain name (website address) that is descriptive, easy to remember and adaptable (to ever changing website content), accessibility recommends providing end users with a seamless experience across multiple devices by means of a responsive design approach. By employing such a responsive design approach, website content ultimately adapts to the width of the screen of the device it is being viewed on, thereby facilitating ease of access to content for numerous device sizes. Finally, content delivery suggest providing unique, yet relevant content that is regularly updated to not only engage end users, but also contribute to improving a website's search engine ranking (Louw and Von Solms, 2016). In addition to this, Koo, Chung, Kim and Hlee (2016) note that tourism websites in general should, however, pursue more innovative approaches using technology solutions and identify opportunities related to newly emerging concepts of electronic tourism marketplaces and digitally connected (smart) tourists.

The concept of "smart" has become increasingly more popular when used to describe technological, economic and social developments that rely on smart technologies such as sensors, big data, open data, open Application Programming Interfaces (APIs), novel human-machine connections and interaction, as well as multi-device, networked informational exchange (Gretzel, Zhong and Koo, 2016).

When applying the concept to tourism specifically, smart technologies are capable of changing consumer experiences, enhancing the tourism experience all the while generating creative tourism business models by harvesting the power of cloud computing, big data, mobile applications (apps), location-based services, geo-tag services, beacon technology, Virtual Reality (VR), Augmented Reality (AR) and social networking services (Gretzel et al., 2016).

Destinations may also choose to be "smart" by taking advantage of these technological developments and incorporating them on their ODW, thereby delivering a more immersive online tourism experience. This may have the potential to not only streamline the process of customer conversion quite considerably, but also open up the world of travel to those who may not necessarily have the means or privilege to physically travel themselves (Louw, 2017). With the rapid evolution of ICTs and the introduction of smart technologies in particular, however, tourism has become not only more accessible, but arguably also more competitive with an online, try-before-you-buy tourism experience now becoming a reality (Louw, 2017). An opportunity thus exists for ODWs to take advantage of these, and additional technologies, to enhance a prospective tourist's online, pre-tourism experience. The battle is no longer for top physical (offline) destination only, but also for online destination of choice.

An analysis of the chosen features and functionalities implemented on ODWs maintained by some of the world's most popular destinations (based on 2015 results per country), follows next.

Official Destination Website (ODW) analysis

According to the World Tourism Organization (2016), when ranking the world's top international tourism countries, it is deemed preferable to take more than a single indicator into account. As a result, two key inbound tourism indicators, international tourist arrivals and international tourism receipts, results in two lists. When looking at the results for 2015 specifically, seven destinations appear under the top 10 of both lists including China, France, Germany, Italy, Spain, United Kingdom and the United States (World Tourism Organization, 2016:6).

As a result, these seven countries will form the core focus of this study with the ODW of the capital city of each of these countries having been selected for analysis. A summary of the chosen countries and their capital city is now visible in Table 1.

Country	Capital City
China	Beijing
France	Paris
Germany	Berlin
Italy	Rome
Spain	Madrid
United Kingdom	London
United States	Washington D.C.

Table 1: Top 7 tourism countries (2015) and their capital cities (ordered alphabetically by country) (World Tourism Organization, 2016).

In section 3, visibility, accessibility and content delivery were identified as key aspects to consider when attempting to reach and accommodate the largest possible audience on a website. As such, each capital city's ODW will be individually visited, viewed and inspected. In each case, recording its Uniform Resource Locater (URL) (visibility), identifying whether responsive design has been implemented (accessibility), and noting key features and functionalities (content delivery) will be performed. This, in turn, will be used to identify differences and similarities between the various ODWs, thereby establishing possible guidelines and future trends.

I commence my analysis of the identified countries' capital city ODW, starting with China, next.

China (Beijing)

Beijing has opted for developing and maintaining an ODW which is parked at the URL *http://www.visitbeijing.com.cn*. Although end users are automatically directed to a particular (desktop or mobile) version of the ODW depending on the device they are viewing it on, they are expected to manually toggle between viewing a mobile version (optimised for viewing on smaller screens) and a desktop version (more information available although best viewed on desktop machines) from the same device. A manual, responsive design approach has thus been chosen.

The original language of the website is Simplified Chinese although users may choose to view the website in additional languages including English, French, Japanese, Spanish, Korean, German, Russian, Arabic and Traditional Chinese. For each supported language, a dedicated

subdomain on the desktop as well as the mobile version of the website has been implemented, i.e. *en.visitbeijing.com.cn* (English, mobile version) and *english.visitbeijing.com.cn* (English, desktop version), resulting in almost separate, language-specific versions of the ODW, each version providing different content and a unique User Experience (UX). Beijing's ODW acts as central point of reference for the other online activities it undertakes including listing its blog postings as well as Facebook and WeChat profiles. Basic keyword based, site-wide search functionality is supported by ticket sales to selected attractions by linking to a separate (partner) website. Attraction tickets and sales are thus not directly facilitated on the ODW, but rather, by a partner website.

Lastly, downloadable tourism resources in PDF format are made available as supplementary content.

In the next section, I proceed by conducting a similar analysis on France's capital city, Paris.

France (Paris)

Paris has opted for developing and maintaining an ODW which is parked at the URL *http://www.parisinfo.com*. Although the original website is in French, visitors may choose to view the ODW in English, Spanish, German, Italian, Portuguese, Dutch, Russian, Japanese, Chinese and Korean. This is made possible by creating a subdomain for each language version (for example *en.parisinfo.com* for the English version) of the ODW. Responsive design ensures that the same ODW may be viewed seamlessly on almost any device. Aggregation of other online activities including social network presences on Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Google Plus, Instagram and Vines, as well as travel website TripAdvisor, are listed. A newsletter, blog, keyword based site-wide search, advanced accommodation search, restaurant search, attractions search and a weather widget are complemented by the ability to make a distinction between travellers for business (professionals and press) versus leisure purposes.

Booking of certain attraction tickets and supporting products is available directly on the ODW with customer reviews of these products also made available. Tourism resources such as maps are available as downloads from the ODW, while a smartphone app, "Welcome to Paris" is additionally also available for Android and iOS devices as a complementary asset.

In the next section, I focus on Berlin, Germany.

Germany (Berlin)

Berlin has opted for developing and maintaining an ODW which is parked at the URL *http://www.visitberlin.de*. The website is not responsive, nor does it offer visitors the opportunity to view a mobile optimised version of the site. Translated versions of the website are available in English, Spanish, French, Italian, Dutch, Polish, Portuguese, Russian, Turkish, Japanese, Arabic, Korean and Chinese, while the original website is in German. Translate versions are made available through subpages e.g. *http://www.visitberlin.de/en* for the English version. Although purchases (such as transport and attraction tickets) are not possible directly on the site, links to partner-websites are listed where purchases may be made. Aggregation of other online activities including social network live feeds of Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Google Plus, are complemented by listing a presence on Instagram while also providing a blog and newsletter. Keyword based, site-wide search, accommodation search and event search facilitate further means to curate and access information about the destination

Visitor download documents are also made available in addition to being able to distinguish between travellers for tourism, business and press. The ODW has also opted for displaying third party (Ads by Google) advertisements as well as their own curated advertisements.

There is an ability to increase text size on the ODW while a smartphone app, "Going Local Berlin", along with other app listings covering various aspects of the city, is also available.

Rome, Italy is the next destination to be analysed.

Italy (Rome)

Rome has opted for developing and maintaining an ODW which is parked at the URL *http://www.turismoroma.it*. End users are automatically redirected to either the mobile or desktop version of the ODW, depending on the type of device they use to view the website on, and are expected to manually toggle between viewing a mobile version (optimised for viewing on smaller screens) and a desktop version (more information available although best viewed on desktop machines) of the ODW. A manual, responsive design approach has thus been chosen. The original language of the website is Italian although users may choose to view the website in additional languages including English, French, Japanese, Spanish, German, Russian, Arabic and Chinese. Translate versions are made available through subpages e.g. *http://www.turismoroma.it/?lang=en* for the English version. Aggregation of other online activities including social network live feeds of YouTube, Instagram, Facebook and Twitter are complemented by a link to each profile.

A site-wide, keyword search, events search and ability to differentiate between visitors travelling for tourism and business purposes facilitate ease of access to information. A comprehensive list of smartphone apps is made available, as well as weather forecasts and tourism resource downloads (such as maps). Although no sales (tickets or otherwise) are possible on the site, links to external websites to facilitate purchases are, while internal partner advertisements are also present.

In the next section, I focus on Madrid, Spain.

Spain (Madrid)

Madrid has opted for developing and maintaining an ODW which is parked at the URL *http://www.esmadrid.com*. Although the original website is in Spanish, visitors may choose to view the ODW in English, French, German, Italian, Portuguese, Russian, Japanese and Chinese. Translate versions are made available through subpages e.g. *https://www.esmadrid.com/en* for the English version.

Aggregation of other online activities occurs by including links to profiles on social networks Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and YouTube while also including live feeds of Facebook, Twitter and YouTube. Responsive design ensures that the same ODW may be viewed seamlessly on almost any device while a blog, keyword based site-wide search and event search facilitate further means to curate and access information about the destination. A weather forecast's widget and tourism resource downloads (such as maps) are provided, and, although no sales (tickets or otherwise) are possible on the site, internal partner advertisements are present to facilitate sales through their websites. A live chat functionality is also provided in the event of visitors needing assistance.

London, United Kingdom is the next destination that will be analysed.

United Kingdom (London)

London has opted for developing and maintaining an ODW which is parked at the URL *http://www.visitlondon.com*. Although the original website is in English, visitors may choose to view the ODW in French, Spanish, German, Italian and Chinese. This is made possible by

creating a subpage for each language version (for example *www.visitlondon.com/fr?* for the French version) of the ODW. Responsive design ensures that the same ODW may be viewed seamlessly on almost any device, while a list of smartphone apps, including "Visit London", are additionally also available as complementary assets.

In addition to these resources, a VR tour of some of London's popular sites also provides visitors with an opportunity to start exploring the destination from almost anywhere in the world – a true try-before-you-buy experience.

Aggregation of other online activities including social network presences on Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Google Plus, Instagram and Pinterest, as well as travel website TripAdvisor, are listed.

Keyword based site-wide search, things to do (attractions and restaurants) search with (yelp and TripAdvisor) ratings and accommodation search (through Booking.com partner website plugin) facilitate further means to curate and access information about the destination.

Although tickets are not sold directly on the ODW, links are provided to partner websites while a combination of internal curated advertisements and third party (Ads by Google) advertisements are displayed. Tourism resource downloads are also available.

Washington D.C. will be the last destination to be analysed.

United States (Washington D.C.)

Washington D.C. has opted for developing and maintaining an ODW which is parked at the URL *https://washington.org*. Although the original website is in English, visitors may choose to view the ODW in Spanish, German, French, Italian, Portuguese, Arabic, Japanese, Chinese and Korean. This is made possible by creating separate pages for each language version (for example *washington.org/fr/homepage* for the French version) of the ODW. Responsive design ensures that the same ODW may be viewed seamlessly on almost any device.

Aggregation of other online activities including social network presences on Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Pinterest and Instagram, as well as travel website TripAdvisor, are listed. A live stream of curated tourist images using the hashtag #MYDCCOOL from Instagram is also displayed.

A newsletter, keyword based site-wide search, accommodation search, restaurant search, things to do search and event search facilitate further means to curate and access information about the destination.

There is support for certain sales directly on the ODW (*http://reservations.washington.org*) also indicating product reviews (through third party API TripAdvisor), while external links are also provided to partner websites for additional purchases. Internal curated advertisements are displayed in addition to tourism resource downloads being available.

A more comprehensive discussion on all of the ODWs follows next.

Discussion

With the ODWs of the capital cities of some of the world's most popular destinations having been analysed individually, we now proceed by discussing the ODWs as a whole. A summary of the features and functionalities of each of these ODWs is now also visible in Table 2.

	China (Beijing)	France (Paris)	Germany (Berlin)	Italy (Rome)	Spain (Madrid)	United Kingdom (London)	United States (Washington D.C.)
URL	http://www.visitbeijing.com.cn	http://www.parisinfo.com	http://www.visitberlin.de	http://www.turismoroma.it	http://www.esmadrid.com	http://www.visitlondon.com	https://washington.org
Responsive	Yes (Manual)	Yes	No	Yes (Manual)	Yes	Yes	Yes
Foreign Languages	AR, CHN, EN, FR, GR, JP, KO, RU, SP	CHN, EN, FR, GR, IT, JP, KO, NL, PR, RU, SP	AR, CHN, EN, FR, GR, IT, JP, KO, NL, PO, PR, RU, TU, SP	AR, CHN, EN, FR, GR, IT, JP, RU, SP	CHN, EN, FR, GR, IT, JP, PR, RU, SP	CHN, EN, FR, GR, IT, SP	AR, CHN, EN, FR, GR, IT, JP, KO, PR, SP
# Foreign Languages	9	11	14	9	9	6	10
Foreign Language Approach	Subdomain	Subdomain	Subpage	Subpage	Subpage	Subpage	Subpage
Blog	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No	No
Newsletter	No	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	Yes
Social Networks	Facebook, WeChat	Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Google Plus, Instagram, Pinterest, Vines	Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Google Plus, Instagram	Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram	Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram	Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Google Plus, Instagram, Pinterest	Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram, Pinterest
# Social Networks	2	7	5	4	4	6	5
Social Network Live Feeds	No	No	Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Google Plus	Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram	Facebook, Twitter, YouTube	-	Instagram
Travel Partner Listing	No	TripAdvisor	No	No	No	TripAdvisor	TripAdvisor
Sales on Site	No	Yes	No	No	No	No	Yes
Keyword Search	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Accommodation Search	No	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes
Restaurant Search	No	Yes	No	No	No	Yes	Yes
Attractions/events Search	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Product Reviews	No	Yes	No	No	No	Yes	Yes
Resource Downloads	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Advertisements	No	No	External	Internal	Internal	External and Internal	Internal
Smartphone App	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No
Smartphone App Platforms	-	Android, iOS	Android, iOS	Android, iOS	-	iOS	-
Weather Widget	No	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	No	No
Live Chat	No	No	No	No	Yes	No	No

Table 2: ODW Features and Functionalities Complete Summary (by the author).

The first thing to notice is that all of the identified destinations (capital cities) have decided to implement an ODW which, in turn, emphasises the importance of an online presence for offline tourism destinations. Additionally, in each case, the particular city's name is also used in its URL, most often with "visit" preceding it. Ensuring that a destination's name, in some shape or form, is present in its URL is thus a key takeaway to ensure visibility.

While responsive design has been employed by the majority of ODWs, some designs require visitors to manually switch between viewing mobile and desktop versions of the website, thereby limiting accessibility. This creates a fragmented UX and also provides additional overhead from a development perspective as two, virtually separate websites, need to be developed and maintained. By allowing one design to fluidly adapt to any device, a more seamless UX is delivered, while development efforts may be focused on one resource, thereby eliminating duplication of work.

Foreign language support has been widely adopted with Chinese, English, French, German, Japanese and Spanish being supported on all ODWs. This is primarily achieved by implementing dedicated subpages for each language version of the ODW, although hosting pages on a dedicated subdomain offers an alternative. While translation may require additional skills and expertise from a development team, instant translate approaches

provided by website plugins (such as the Google Translate website plugin for instance) may offer a faster, though often less accurate, alternative to communicating with a global audience.

Although blog and newsletter support varies from one ODW to the next, aggregation of social media presence is a common occurrence. As mentioned earlier, this provides visitors with the opportunity to curate their own communication preferences based on their platform of choice, however, live feed social media website plugins also allow visitors who do not own an account on a particular platform to stay up to date with the latest news when visiting a particular ODW. Furthermore, by assigning an official destination hashtag on social media, ODWs may incorporate user generated data, such as photographs from Instagram for instance, to not only create hype, but also interact with visitors directly. This ultimately allows the outsourcing of everyday tasks such as destination photography, at a fraction of the cost, further contributing to destination marketing.

When it comes to sales conducted directly on ODWs, the majority have opted for providing links to external/partner websites that handle payments. Outsourcing the task of payment processing may primarily be chosen because of the additional overhead (time, technology, staff and monetary resources) introduced to an ODW to ensure that it is sufficiently secure to process payments and other sensitive data. A logical partitioning between browsing on ODWs and buying on partner websites is thus the mainstream approach and may prove to be the more security conscious approach too. As visitors to ODWs possibly visit these websites with the intention of finding information, provision of various search functionalities including keyword based site-wide search, accommodation search, restaurant search and attraction/event search have been provided by the majority of ODWs. The emphasis thus falls on providing instant access to core pieces of information to ensure that not only the information, but also the ODW as a whole, remains relevant.

Once the desired information is found on an ODW, Miller (2016) states that the next step, i.e. achieving visitor loyalty, becomes possible when satisfied visitors become ambassadors of the particular destination. By incorporating visitor reviews on ODWs, there exists an opportunity to subsequently grow a destination's ambassador base. While attractions are often lauded for entertaining and engaging rides, shows, exhibits, and adventure experiences, much of this can be attributed to how well they gather, evaluate and act on feedback from guests (Miller, 2016). By incorporating reviews of a particular experience on an ODW, destinations may take care to process feedback from visitors and execute responses accordingly. This may be done by incorporating the functionality on the ODW itself, or by leveraging the services of third parties such as TripAdvisor and Yelp instead. These reviews may benefit the offline environment in providing guidelines on how to improve the actual service delivered, as well as the online environment (ODW) by providing more comprehensive reviews to assist visitors in their decision making process.

Additional value-adding resources such as PDF map downloads, destination-specific smartphone apps (primarily for Android and iOS devices) and weather widgets provide visitors with an almost tangible piece of insight into a particular destination. Advanced functionalities such as VR tours and live chats may be utilised to elevate this experience even further, and as discussed earlier, enhance a visitor's online, pre-tourism experience. VR may show particular promise in online tourism going forward, as it has the ability to create visitor "empathy", thereby taking an experience to new heights (Boeing, 2017). Smartphone apps, whether of an official nature or not, in turn facilitate and encourage the advancement of smart tourism.

Although ODWs may aim to inform, equip and to a certain extent also intrigue or excite visitors, incorporating advertisements is still a common practice in attempting to monetise these digital investments. As such, internally selected advertisements, third party advertisements, or a combination of both advertisements may be placed on ODWs. The contents may, or may not, relate directly to the content of the ODW. Caution in placing and selecting advertisements should, however, be taken to ensure that the advertisements are value adding, relevant and

not distracting or offensive (Chang, 2016). Despite the immense amount of seemingly useful and relevant information that ODWs may provide visitors, Wilson (1999:294) states that they may still feel like they are simply drowning in information, while starving for wisdom. As a result, it is noted that much of the world (physical and digital in nature) will be run by synthesizers, those who are able to put together the right information at the right time, think critically about it, and make important choices wisely (Wilson, 1999:294).

ODWs have an opportunity to act as these much-needed synthesizers by assisting tourists before, during and after their online as well as an offline (physical) visits. As such, these websites should be seen as forming an integrated, rather than independent, part of facilitating tourism and should be implemented not only because of the positive relation between tourism and economic growth, but also because of the strategic role that tourism plays in stimulating economic recovery (Shahzad,et al., 2017). The mere existence of a website does, however, not guarantee visitors (Kriechbaumer and Christodoulidou, 2014) and careful attention should be given when developing, implementing and maintaining such an ODW. Improvements should be done on a continuous basis to ensure the deliverance of a quality website and although there is no one common definition of quality because of its multidimensional meanings (Ramphal, 2016). Summers (2005) defines quality as a customer determination which is based on the customer's actual experience with the product or service, measured against agreed requirements. Furthermore, these requirements are moving targets in a competitive market.

As website quality can directly affect customer satisfaction and lead to purchase intention, competitive ODWs have the potential to allow customers to bypass travel intermediaries and turn their attention directly to ODWs for various aspects of their travel planning instead (Jeon and Jeong, 2016). As such, service quality on ODWs, and other online travel service provider websites such as lodging websites (Jeon and Jeong, 2016), becomes a more relevant and important issue than ever.

Conclusion

The uplifting financial impact that tourism may have on local and global economies of scale has resulted in tourists becoming a highly sought-after commodity. As a result of ICTs and their impact on the tourism industry specifically, innovative new approaches to reaching and marketing prospective destinations to potential tourists has become possible to such an extent that an online, almost pre-tourism (try-before-you-buy) experience has become a reality.

Official Destination Websites (ODWs) may take advantage of this opportunity by curating key pieces of information thereby assisting tourists before, during and after both an online as well as an offline (physical) visit to a particular destination. Tourism is thus not only about the offline experience anymore, but equally about the online experience. ODWs can thus be seen as playing an integrated, rather than independent, part of facilitating tourism, also emphasising the importance of maintaining such a website to current and prospective destinations.

With existing literature providing few guidelines on features and functionality of ODWs, aspiring destinations are provided with very little assistance if they may choose to implement an ODW of their own and compete for tourists in the online environment. In response to this, our study focused on analysing the features and functionality of seven of the world's most popular destinations' capital city ODWs including Beijing, Paris, Berlin, Rome, Madrid, London and Washington D.C.

The main findings from the analysis, in short, included the following:

- All identified destinations' capital cities have opted for creating an ODW. The importance of an online presence for offline destinations is thereby highlighted.

- Including a destination's name in its URL is imperative to ensure its visibility. Combinations of the name with additional words such as "visit" and "info" may offer attractive alternatives.

- Responsive design approaches have largely been adopted to provide one ODW that can be viewed on multiple devices. Manual responsive designs that require visitors to manually switch between separate versions of the ODW depending on the device being used are also an option, although this may result in duplication of work and prove to be counterproductive. A responsive design approach, however, facilitates reaching the largest possible audience.

- Foreign language support for Chinese, English, French, German, Japanese and Spanish is widely implemented through either dedicated, translated subpages or a dedicated, translated version of the ODW hosted on a subdomain. Although translation may require specialised skills, third party page translation plugins such as Google's Translate widget may be implemented to facilitate basic translation at early stage development.

- Although blog and newsletters still prove to be a popular method of reaching prospective audiences, aggregation of social media presences is more popular.

- This allows visitors to curate their own digital communication preferences and pursue further contact through their own preferred online channels and platforms, while assignment of an official destination social media hashtag not only allows outsourcing tasks such as destination photography and marketing, but also facilitates direct interaction with visitors. Live social network feeds incorporated on ODWs in turn allow visitors who do not belong to certain/any social networks to also join in on the conversation, providing a more inclusive, "social" element to social media campaigns.

- Outsourcing the processing of online sales and payments to partner websites is a common occurrence and arguably also a more security conscious decision.

- Providing keyword based site-wide search, accommodation search, restaurant search and activities/events search ensures that not only the information on an ODW is sought-after and relevant, but the ODW in its entirety too.

- By providing reviews of products and services, both the offline environment and online environment may benefit from improved service delivery and the ability to provide more comprehensive feedback, thereby assisting customer decision making, respectively. Third party rating service plugins such as TripAdvisor and Yelp may prove to be particularly useful during early development phases.

- Additional value-adding resources such as PDF map downloads, destination-specific smartphone apps (primarily for Android and iOS devices) and weather widgets provide visitors with an almost tangible piece of insight into a particular destination. Advanced functionalities such as VR tours and live chats may be utilised to elevate this experience even further, also enhancing a visitor's online, pre-tourism experience. VR may show particular promise in online tourism going forward, as it has the ability to create visitor "empathy", thereby amplifying an experience, while smartphone apps may facilitate and encourage smart tourism developments.

- Advertisements that are internally approved and placed, or externally coordinated (Ads by Google for example) may offer additional revenue generation from ODWs, although caution in placing and selecting advertisements should be taken to ensure that they are value adding, relevant and not distracting or offensive.

With the masses of online information available at prospective tourists' fingertips, they may, however, feel that they are drowning in information, while starving for wisdom. Synthesizers, those who able to put together the right information at the right time, think critically about it, and make important choices wisely (Wilson, 1999:294) have thus become an equally south-after commodity, just as tourists themselves. ODWs have the opportunity to act as synthesizers to both prospective online, and undertaking offline, tourists.

By continuously enhancing these ODWs from good, reassessing so that they may become better and optimising so that they may be the best, a tourism experience of good, better and ultimately the best, may subsequently be built. The main challenge, however, is keeping up with the speed of technological and informational evolution in an attempt to remain relevant.

As website quality can directly affect customer satisfaction and lead to purchase intention, competitive ODWs have the potential to allow customers to bypass travel intermediaries and turn their attention directly to ODWs for various aspects of their travel planning instead (Jeon and Jeong, 2016). As such, service quality on ODWs, and various other online travel service provider websites becomes a more important issue than ever.

This research provides a departure point for both prospective and current ODWs when deciding which content to firstly provide on their website, while also summarising the general trend in content already being provided by the world's leading destinations (in 2016) and their associated ODWs (allowing comparative analysis). Furthermore, this research can provide future research direction by encouraging research projects to pursue the development of quality and assessing trends in the development of ODWs and various other online hospitality and tourism service providers as seen similarly by authors in online lodging (Jeon and Jeong, 2016).

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