Small hotels' web site performance in transition countries: survey results from Croatia

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PROGRAM

Sessions, Panels, Roundtables & Posters

(To find your assignments please point to "Edit" and then "Find"; type in your last name and hit the Enter key)

Saturday, July 7, 2012
8:00 AM – 10:00 AM
Room: Schloss Saal II

Session [12]: Marketing Applications & The Social Network

CHAIR: Ho-don Yan, Feng Chia University, Taiwan.

AUTHORS & TITLES:

Guilherme Pires & Rachel Shuk Yee Cheung, University of Newcastle, Australia.
Conceptualising the Application of Relationship Marketing Orientation to the
Internal Business Environment. [1]

Shih-Ju Wang & Heng-Chiang Huang, National Taiwan University, Taiwan.
Social Relationship and Innovation Performance: The Case of Motion Picture Projects. [2]

Daniela Garbin Praničević, Ljudevit Pranić, University of Split, Croatia &
Josip Arnerić, University of Zagreb, Croatia.
Small Hotels' Website Performance in Transition Countries. [3]

Ágnes Hofmeister-Tóth, Kata Kelemen & Marianna Piskóti, Corvinus University of Budapest,
Hungary.
Life Paths in Hungary in the Light of Commitment to Sustainability. [4]

Hussain Ali Bekhet, Basheer A. Al-Alak, Universiti Tenaga Nasional, Malaysia
Ghaleb Awad El-Refae, Al-Ain University of Science and Technology, UAE
Marketing Feasibility of Malaysian Eco-products**.** [5]

DISCUSSANTS:

1. **Ágnes Hofmeister-Tóth,** Corvinus University of Budapest, Hungary.

2. **Guilherme Pires,** University of Newcastle, Australia.

3. **Ghaleb Awad El-Refae,** Al-Ain University of Science and Technology, UAE.

4. **Ivana Žilić,** College of Šibenik, Croatia.

5. **Kata Kelemen,** Corvinus University of Budapest, Hungary.

Coffee Break: 10:00 AM – 10:30 AM

SMALL HOTELS' WEB SITE PERFORMANCE IN TRANSITION COUNTRIES: SURVEY RESULTS FROM CROATIA

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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 small hotels from the perspectives of user-friendliness, site attractiveness, marketing effectiveness, and F&B informativeness. Additional analyses were performed to examine the potential differences in website performance between small hotels in regards to quality rating and location. A team of 30 trained evaluators assessed the websites of a stratified random sample of 72 small hotels using the updated balanced scorecard (BSC) approach. Although an overwhelming majority of small hoteliers recognize the importance of online presence, most are not effectively using websites from the user-friendliness, marketing effectiveness, and F&B informativeness perspectives. It was further revealed that hotel location is significant in explaining differences in site F&B informativeness. Study ends with a discussion of conclusions and implications for small hotel operators and academic researchers.

Key words: *website evaluation, balanced scorecard (BSC), small hotels, transition countries, Croatia*

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 small hotels from the perspectives of user-friendliness, site attractiveness, marketing effectiveness, and F&B informativeness. Additional analyses were performed to examine the potential differences in website performance between small hotels in regards to quality rating and location. A team of 30 trained evaluators assessed the websites of a stratified random sample of 72 small hotels using the updated balanced scorecard (BSC) approach. Although an overwhelming majority of small hoteliers recognize the importance of online presence, most are not effectively using websites from the user-friendliness, marketing effectiveness, and F&B informativeness perspectives. It was further revealed that hotel location is significant in explaining differences in site F&B informativeness. Study ends with a discussion of conclusions and implications for small hotel operators and academic researchers.

I.   INTRODUCTION

A recent study in the tourism and hospitality context revealed that website quality directly and positively impacts on customer satisfaction and purchase intentions (Bai et al., 2008). Moreover, in the academic literature, Internet has been recognized as increasingly important information dissemination, communication, online purchasing, and distribution channel for hotels and consumers (Buhalis & Law, 2008; Musante et al., 2009). As of December 2011, there are over 2.2 billion Internet users worldwide (Miniwatts Marketing Group, 2012). According to the Nielsen (2010) 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. (Google/IPSOS OTX Media CT, 2011) and fourth internationally (Travelport, 2010) as a source of travelers' 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 (Law et al., 2010; Morrison et al., 1999; O'Connor & Frew, 2002). However, Internet presence is not a guarantee of success (Liang & Law, 2003), and many businesses have failed to utilize their websites effectively (Chung & Law, 2003; Kim et al., 2009).

To improve the effectiveness of a business website, evaluation of website performance has been a growing concern among tourism scholars since the late 1990s (Law et al., 2010). Despite these tendencies, a closer inspection of the tourism website evaluation scholarly research comprehensively reviewed by Law et al. 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 (Law et al., 2010). 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 travelers. 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 (Lee & Morrison, 2010).

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 websites of small hotels in a transition economy using the modified balanced scorecard (BSC) approach;
2. Use the BSC to assess the relative strengths and weaknesses of small hotel websites from the user-friendliness, site attractiveness, marketing effectiveness, and F&B informativeness perspectives;
3. Empirically explore whether the small hotel website performance is associated with hotel's quality rating and location;
4. Provide a set of recommendations to help small 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 small hotels, helps them better understand what has been achieved in transition economies 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. Subsequently, the section covering transition

countries help contextualize the current study. We then describe the methodology employed, followed by a discussion of the results and the study's conclusions and implications.

II.   HOTEL WEBSITE 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 (Law et al. 2010).

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 (Law et al., 2010). For instance, Lee and Morrison (2010) 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 (1999) balanced scorecard (BSC) approach with 72 technical, customer, marketing effectiveness, and upscale critical success factors. Musante et al. (2009) 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 (2009) 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. (2008) 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 (2008) 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. (2006) 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 (2006) 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. (1999) 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 (Law et al., 2010). For example, Essawy (2006) 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 (2001) 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 behaviors (i.e., intention to use information, information use, and recommendation). They found perceived usefulness and attitudes to be significant predictors of the customers' behavioral intentions.

Automated methods rely on software systems for website evaluation (Law et al., 2010). An example of an automated method is a study by Chan and Law (2006), 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 (2006) 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 (2003) 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 (Law et al., 2010). In the investigation of the website effectiveness of the U.S. limited-service chain

lodging operations, Ham (2004) 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. (2004) 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 (Law et al., 2010; Morrison et al., 2004). 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 (Klein et al., 2004; Lee & Morrison, 2010; Morrison et al., 1999, 2004). The BSC was developed by Kaplan and Norton (1992, 1993) in response to a need to shift the focus from solely financial objectives to also include non-financial measures in evaluating business performance (Morrison et al., 2004; Werner & Xu, 2012). 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 (Lee & Morrison, 2010). 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 (Barker et al., 2003). Now, over 133 public and private sector organizations (of every size and spanning every industry) from around the globe use the BSC (Harvard Business Publishing Newsletters, 2010).

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 (Morrison et al., 2004). While the first tourism and hotel website evaluation study that used the BSC (i.e., Morrison et al., 1999) 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. (2004), Morrison et al. (2004), and Lee and Morrison (2010).

The preceding brief overview suggests that the hotel website performance-related research – while small in number – is evolving. Nevertheless, several limitations in the available research are evident. First, the existing peer reviewed articles on website performance have mostly centered on large and medium sized hotels, while small hotels are an under-researched area. In fact, only studies by Klein et al. (2004), Morrison et al. (1999), and Schegg et al. (2002) have looked at small lodgings', which are an important product in some countries, i.e. Croatia. To date, small hotels in Croatia, i.e. those with 25 rooms or less, comprise 38% (264 out of 699 hotels total) of Croatia's hotel industry (authors' own analysis). Second, all but one of the peer reviewed articles (i.e., Spremić & Strugar, 2008) have focused on lodging establishments in developed and developing countries (e.g., Law et al., 2010; Morrison et al., 2004). Meanwhile, much less is known about hotels in transition economies.

III. TRANSITION COUNTRIES

The term 'countries in transition' exclusively applies to the former communist countries of Central and Eastern Europe, including the former Soviet Union (United Nations Statistics Division, 2011), that are undergoing a grueling social, political, and economic transformation from a centrally planned economy to a market-based one (Goić and Bilić, 2008). This process of transition begun in the late 1980's following the fall of both the Berlin wall and the communist system. During the decades leading to the fall of the Berlin Wall, private-sector entrepreneurship in these countries was restricted, confined, hampered, suppressed, and even illegal (Goić and Bilić, 2008). To this extent, from the developed country perspective, all transition countries either went or are still going through similar processes and face or have faced analogous developmental issues, and thus may be considered as relatively homogenous.

Now, after more than 20 years since the onset of the transition era, the free market economy surprisingly still remains an elusive concept in many, albeit not all, aspects of society at large. Hence, the social fabric in Croatia and other transition countries cannot be understood simply by looking at developed and other non-transition countries. Host population's perceptions and behaviors are products of complex and long lasting past processes, and thus take time to change. In fact, a business culture in the transition countries

cannot be explained exclusively either by their communist heritage or by their journey through transformation. Therefore, the process of introducing modern market mechanics into Central and Eastern European transition countries continues with a specific task of significantly altering the host population's social, economic, political, and environmental attitudes and behaviors.

With these ideas in mind, it appears important to understand whether hotels in transition countries such as Croatia provide the latest sought-after website-related information, services, and applications by today's sophisticated travelers, and to what extent. Through an empirical assessment of small hotels' websites in Croatia, this article seeks to make a contribution in the needed direction.

IV. METHODOLOGY

To evaluate and analyze small hotel websites, an official listing comprising 264 small lodging establishments in 2011 was provided courtesy of Croatia's Ministry of Tourism. Of these, 26 did not have their individual website, and thus were excluded from our sampling frame. Of the remaining 238 small lodgings, a stratified random sample of 72 (30%) small hotels was obtained using an online research randomizer (http://www.randomizer.org). Our sample was obtained by splitting the sampling frame into eight strata, with each stratum comprising a unique combination of one hotel quality rating (2-star, 3-star, 4-star, and 5-star) and one location (Adriatic Croatia and continental Croatia). For instance, the first stratum was made up of 2-star hotels in Croatia's Adriatic region. The second stratum contained 3-star hotels in the Adriatic region, etc. We then obtained a random sample from each stratum that is proportional 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 small hotels in a transition economy using the modified BSC approach. A two-page anonymous self-administered BSC instrument in Croatian was used for data gathering. A standard forward/backward translation procedure was followed. The modified BSC approach (Kline et al., 2004; Lee & Morrison, 2010; Morrison et al., 1999, 2004) was adopted as the overall framework for the evaluation process. As suggested by previous research, F&B (Horng & Tsai, 2010; Jeong, 2004; Kim et al., 2009; Kline et al., 2004; Lee & Morrison, 2010) and other destination-related factors were added to the BSC. Namely, since tourism organizations at different levels can be involved in marketing a destination (Wang & Fesenmaier, 2007), 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 (Chung & Law, 2003). Altogether, four perspectives (i.e., user-friendliness, site attractiveness, marketing effectiveness, and F&B information availability) on the performance of small hotel websites were evaluated, as detailed in Table 1. To reduce subjectivity, this study employed a dichotomous yes/no response for each of the 59 website attributes (Ismail et al., 2002).

User-friendliness was evaluated with 12 yes/no items. Therein, the following new item was added: 'is Skype clearly available on homepage?' Namely, with 663 million users worldwide in 2010, Skype (owned by Microsoft since 2011) allows both current and prospective travelers to communicate with a hotel by voice, video, and instant messaging over the Internet for free using a simple 'click to call/video call' function on a hotel's website. Moreover, based on the instrument pre-test, an item 'is there limited vertical and horizontal scrolling?' used in previous studies was split into two items, one dealing with vertical scrolling, and the other with horizontal scrolling. Site attractiveness was evaluated with eight yes/no items.

Marketing effectiveness was measured using 33 yes/no items. Several new items were added, such as 'availability of destination map with marked tourist points of interest (e.g., bike trails, wine roads, etc.),' 'panoramic view of hotel's surroundings,' 'local weather forecast,' etc. Six specific items of F&B information availability were evaluated with yes/no responses. For instance, one item read 'can menu be printed directly from the hotel's website?'

A group of 30 tourism and hospitality undergraduate students from a Croatian university were recruited to evaluate 72 small hotel websites. Prior to website evaluations, all the evaluators attended a training session that provided specific instructions on how to use the BSC instrument. They then pilot evaluated the same two hotel websites with the same BSC instrument. The two inter-rater reliability tests for the dichotomous scale data were then performed on the scores of 30 evaluators. The Kendall's coefficients of concordance for the two pilot evaluated websites were $W=.437$ and $W=.533$, respectively. Since a result in the 0.4-0.6 range is considered to indicate a moderate level of agreement (Landis & Koch, 1977), this study's results for the inter-rater reliability showed a moderate agreement level.

After the training phase, each evaluator was given a list containing two or three 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 frequency analysis of all variables and 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. A series of Chi-square (χ^2) tests were used to examine the relationships between the individual website attributes/items and hotel location. To test the relationship between the individual attributes and quality rating, χ^2 was not suitable because the number of degrees of freedom was >1 (i.e., the contingency table was greater than 2x2). The differences in website performance in relation to a hotel's location and quality rating were tested by the ANOVA (F-test), which is more robust against variance homoscedacity than the similar t-test when comparing the means between two independent samples. MANOVA was used to test the interaction effects of hotel quality rating and location on each of the four website performance perspectives.

V. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The characteristics of small lodgings in this study's random sample mirror those in the population. That is, of the 72 small lodging establishments, majority (68%) hold a 3-star quality rating and are located (72%) in Croatia's Adriatic (akin to coastal) region (Table 2). Due to representativeness of our sample, this study's results can be generalized to the population of small lodgings in Croatia.

Table 1 shows the frequencies, percentages, and mean ranks for the 59 website criteria. The descriptive analysis revealed that Croatia's small lodgings' websites are missing many important attributes and features. For the user-friendliness perspective, hotels' websites most often lack site map or index, the search option, downloadable plugins to use the website's content effectively, and Skype. The web site attractiveness attributes are present in most of the observed small lodgings. However, many hotels do not use their web page space effectively.

Table 1: Overall performance by website attribute

Perspectives & attributes	No	Yes
	%	
User-friendliness		
Is skype clearly available?	95,8	4,2
Are links to required plug-ins provided?	90,3	9,7
Is a site search engine provided?	80,6	19,4
Is a site map or index available?	66,7	33,3
Is a home button available from all pages?	25,0	75,0
Is a fax number clearly available?	23,6	76,4
Are navigation tools clear and effective on each page?	19,4	80,6
Is the mailing address clearly available?	19,4	80,6
Is a direct e-mail address clearly available?	18,1	81,9
Is the telephone number clearly available?	15,3	84,7
Is there limited vertical scrolling?	13,9	86,1
Is there limited horizontal scrolling?	9,7	90,3
Site attractiveness		
Is the web page space used effectively?	44,4	55,6
Is the background easthetically appealing?	36,1	63,9
Is the homepage clear and uncluttered?	25,0	75,0
Are colors used discreetly?	20,8	79,2
Is there a sufficient contrast between background and text?	16,7	83,3
Are the photographs of good quality?	16,7	83,3
Is the text clear and readable?	9,7	90,3
Are photographs available to reinforce the text content?	8,3	91,7
Marketing effectiveness		
Are FAQs provided?	98,6	1,4
Is information on pet care provided?	98,6	1,4
Is information on child care provided?	97,2	2,8
Are any awards or recognitions that the hotel has earned posted?	91,7	8,3
Does the text introduce the owners/managers?	86,1	13,9
Is calendar of events provided?	86,1	13,9
Are documents needed by international travelers posted?	86,1	13,9
Are guest testimonials available?	84,7	15,3
Is information on site privacy policy available?	83,3	16,7
Are links to information about other local services provided?	79,2	20,8
Is a map showing destination attractions and things-to-do available?	77,8	22,2
Are site usage terms available?	77,8	22,2
Is a virtual tour provided?	73,6	26,4
Is a panoramic view provided?	73,6	26,4
Is information on online payment security available?	73,6	26,4
Is local weather provided?	72,2	27,8
Are links to local activities and attractions provided?	70,8	29,2
Are links to social networks provided?	70,8	29,2
Is information on local activities and events provided?	66,7	33,3
Is information on special external hotel services provided?	66,7	33,3
Are special offers available?	63,9	36,1

Perspectives & attributes (continued)	No	Yes
		%
Are types of payment available?	63,9	36,1
Is the website up-to-date?	61,1	38,9
Is information on special internal hotel services provided?	59,7	40,3
Is online booking of room available on all pages?	50,0	50,0
Does the text describe the uniqueness of the hotel?	45,8	54,2
Is online booking of room available on homepage?	41,7	58,3
Are room rates available?	27,8	72,2
Is destination general information available?	27,8	72,2
Are all pages equally available in all languages listed?	23,6	76,4
Are maps and directions to and from the hotel available?	20,8	79,2
Are photographs of the hotel's exterior provided?	13,9	86,1
Are photographs of the guest rooms provided?	11,1	88,9
F&B informativeness		
Are high chairs available?	98,6	1,4
Are gift certificates available?	97,2	2,8
Is online purchase of gift certificates available?	95,8	4,2
Are operating hours posted?	87,5	12,5
Can menu be printed?	86,1	13,9
Is menu available?	69,4	30,6

Source: Survey November 2011

As for the 33 marketing effectiveness features, many problems were evident. Small lodgings' websites lack updating, maps/directions to and from, virtual tours, panoramic views, local weather information, calendar of events, links to local activities and attractions, special offers, information about owners/managers, awards information, links to social networks, FAQs, guest comments, links to other local information, terms and conditions, privacy policy, and payment methods and security. Most sites had no information about organized child care, pet care, as well as special internal (wellness, transportation, weddings, meetings, etc.) and external (teambuilding, sightseeing, gastro tours, wine roads, sailing, diving, etc.) hotel services. Importantly, about half or so hotels do not have the option to book accommodation on either their homepage or on all pages.

These descriptive findings generally suggest that Croatian hotel web pages serve merely as electronic brochures. Meanwhile, websites' transaction function (i.e., the sales activities; Kiang et al., 2000) remains an unexploited opportunity for a substantial number of lodgings. Moreover, hoteliers' failure to provide links to and information about destination's attractions, activities, festivals, and things-to-do helps explain why in the 1987-2010 period tourists have continuously been dissatisfied with the variety of things to see and do in Croatia (Institute for Tourism, 2010, 2007, 2004). That is, oftentimes the attractions and events are out there, however tourists simply are not made aware of them.

Regarding F&B informativeness, the majority of websites do not have a menu available on the site, menu cannot be printed, there are no gift certificates and they cannot be purchased online, restaurant operating hours are not available, and information regarding high chairs is not provided. While Croatian 2-4 star lodging establishments are not legally required to serve lunch and dinner, many of them do, however the availability of an in-house restaurant may not be apparent to a site's visitor. Even for those lodgings that do not have a lunch/dinner restaurant on premises, they nevertheless could and should furnish information about destination's eateries and possibly generate third-party sales through partnerships with local restaurateurs. This being said, 52% of Croatia's visitors are families with children, and gastronomy was a motive for visiting Croatia in 2010 for 22% of tourists (Institute for Tourism, 2010). Furthermore, while visiting restaurants, cafés, and sit-down patisseries was a dominant activity for 70% of tourists, 69% of them dined outside their lodging establishment, and only one-fifth (19%) used the half-board option. Thus, Croatia's lodgings appear to be missing the boat on communicating their own and/or destination's gastronomic offerings and generating F&B sales through their websites.

Among the 59 website attributes, only four were significantly different between the two regions. Small lodging establishments in continental Croatia scored higher than their Adriatic counterparts in terms of the required vertical scrolling ($\chi^2(1)=4.47$, $p=.035$), availability of maps and directions to and from

($\chi^2(1)$=4.21, p=.040), and possibility of menu printing ($\chi^2(1)$=10.32, p<.001). This finding is somewhat surprising because 96% of total tourist overnights in Croatia are realized in the Adriatic region (Institute for Tourism, 2010). One would thus expect hotels in the tourism-intensive Adriatic Croatia to have websites of higher quality than those in the continental region. Perhaps it is the paucity of tourism in continental Croatia that has forced the hoteliers there to exploit their websites more effectively. As expected, small lodgings in the Adriatic Croatia fared better on the availability of local things to do ($\chi^2(1)$=4.19, p=.041), as compared to hotels in the continental region. Ultimately, lodgings in Croatia's Adriatic region need to decrease the amount of vertical scrolling and focus on providing area maps, directions to and from the hotel, information on local activities and events, and a printer-friendly version of the menu. Hotels in continental Croatia need to fortify their online presence with information on local things to see and do in a destination.

Frequencies, percentages, average means, and overall means for the four website perspectives across all levels of independent variables are presented in Table 2. The site attractiveness had the highest overall mean (77.8) among the four perspectives; however lodgings scored poorly on user-friendliness (47.5), marketing effectiveness (35.6), and F&B informativeness (10.9). Friedman's test was significant ($\chi^2(3)$=146.173, p<.001), suggesting that the four perspectives are not equally present on small lodgings' websites. 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 small lodging's website. Thus, small hotels in Croatia need to center more on improving these three aspects of their websites.

Table 2: Mean evaluation scores by variable and perspective

Variable	User friendliness	Site attractiveness	Marketing effectiveness	F&B informativeness	Average mean	n (%)
Quality rating						72 (100)
2-star	48.61	60.42	36.36	13.89	39.83	6 (8)
3-star	47.28	79.59	33.40	9.52	40.06	49 (68)
4-star	46.67	76.67	39.19	14.44	43.28	15 (21)
5-star	54.17	93.75	59.09	8.33	57.63	2 (3)
Region						72 (100)
Adriatic	46.15	76.92	35.96	7.37	40.68	52 (72)
Continental	50.83	80.00	34.55	20.00	42.54	20 (28)
Overall mean	47.45	77.78	35.56	10.88		

Source: Survey November 2011

The average mean score for the 2-star hotels (Table 2) was the lowest (39.8), whereas 5-star lodgings scored the highest (57.6). Surprisingly, although 5-star hotels scored the highest on user-friendliness, site attractiveness, and marketing effectiveness, they scored the lowest on F&B informativeness (8.3). Also, lodgings in continental Croatia scored overall higher than their Adriatic counterparts, especially in the area of F&B (20 vs. 7.4). ANOVA test was significant (p=.023) only for differences among average means in respect to the hotel quality rating. Thus, the more stars a hotel has, the higher the overall quality of its website. ANOVA did not reveal any significant differences in respect to hotel location.

Among the four website perspectives, the results of ANOVA revealed that lodging sites in continental Croatia have a significantly greater presence of F&B information than their counterparts in the Adriatic region. As discussed earlier, this finding comes as a surprise because one would expect hoteliers in the tourism-intensive Adriatic Croatia to place greater online emphasis on gastronomy, as compared to the continental region. This paradox can perhaps be explained by Croatia's continuous overreliance on the sun and sea experience (Croatian Ministry of Tourism, 2003; Croatian National Tourist Board, 2010) – and not much else, e.g. gastronomy and the variety of things to see and do. There were no other statistically significant differences in website perspectives that could be explained by lodgings' location or quality rating. In terms of the interaction effects of hotel quality rating and location on each of the four website performance perspectives, MANOVA did not reveal any significant results.

VI. CONCLUSION

A finding that over 90% of Croatia's small lodgings have their own website suggests that their owners/managers recognize the importance of online presence. However, this study's main finding is that most small hotels in Croatia are not effectively using websites from the user-friendliness, marketing effectiveness, and F&B informativeness perspectives. Additionally, majority of small hotels scored low (i.e., below 50%) on 35 out of the 59 total website attributes examined in this study. It appears that the Croatian small hoteliers use their websites as meager electronic brochures, thus failing to communicate the unique selling points of both a hotel and a destination to its target audiences.

On top of that, an opportunity to use a hotel website as a platform to facilitate and execute sales transactions seems to escape the owners and operators of small lodgings in Croatia. Stated differently, there is much room for improvement in all three perspectives. Hotel quality rating and location for the most part did not explain the differences among the four website perspectives. One notable exception is the greater web presence of F&B information in continental Croatia, as compared to the Adriatic region.

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 travelers. Another potential limitation is that this study's results for the inter-rater reliability showed a moderate agreement level. Future studies should thus conduct more extensive website evaluation training sessions. Alternatively, the researchers should also complete the evaluations of every hotel in the sample before the evaluators. The researchers should then compare their results with those of the evaluators to fix the possible discrepancies.

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

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