



European tourist destinations on the internet search engines

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Abstract

This paper examines the accessibility and visibility of tourist destinations in a search engine as an opportunity to influence destination competitiveness. The study employed a research design that simulates a traveller's use of four search engines for travel planning by using the concept "tourism" and a set of pre-defined keywords in combination with European tourist destination names. The results of this research reveal that search engines index a great number of websites related to tourism, although the visibility of tourist destinations is extremely low.

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Introduction

Competitiveness has become a central point of tourism policy, especially on tourism destination (Buhalis, 2000; Dwyer and Kim, 2003). In this sense, maintaining competitiveness in the long-term and satisfying tourist demand may require the use of new technologies and integrated online marketing communication strategies, such as websites and search engines by the tourist sector (So and Morrison, 2003). In the field of tourism, the recent evolution of Internet technology has shown that search engines are indeed one of the most persuasive media for destinations to

influence tourists' travel planning process (Hwang *et al.*, 2006). Furthermore, from the point of view of tourist enterprises, being indexed in a search engine and visible as a search result provides an advantage to increase destination competitiveness (Xiang and Fesenmaier, 2006).

However, due to the size of the Internet and the different quality of websites, many issues have emerged with respect to the way search engines index and represent the online world. Consequently, although search engines can potentially retrieve millions of search results

based on a specific query, only a relatively small number of them are presented to the user. The visibility of tourism therefore depends mainly on the classification and position of results (Xiang and Fesenmaier, 2005; Xiang, Wöber and Fesenmaier, 2008). In fact, most of the users of search engines rarely go beyond the first three result pages (30 results) and the majority never look beyond the top 2 results.

Built upon a number of recent studies on search engines and the online tourism domain (Wöber, 2006; Xiang *et al.*, 2008; Wöber and Fesenmaier, 2009; Pan *et al.*, 2011), the objective of this research is to provide an understanding of the representation of fifty European tourist destinations in four search engines, with the main aim of testing tourist destination visibility. This analysis will therefore try to answer the following questions:

- 1) Which is the general visibility ratio of the destinations (capital and non-capital cities) in each of the search engines analyzed in this study? and,
- 2) Which is the presence of specific tourist information available in each search engine and for each of the destinations (capital and non-capital cities) analyzed here?

Methodology

The sample of tourist destinations used consisted of 50 European cities, according to the number of visitors each destination received (Bremner, 2008). Furthermore, the fifty European destinations were divided into two groups depending on whether these cities were the capital of the country (21 cities) or not country capitals (29 cities). In order to assess the presence of each of the tourist destinations by the search engines, ten keywords related to tourist destinations were selected: "tourism", "accommodation", "activities", "areas", "attractions", "events", "information", "restaurants", "shopping" and "places" (i.e. Xiang and Fesenmaier, 2006; Xiang *et al.*, 2008). Finally, four search engines used in this study to determine the representation of tourism in each destination were Google, Yahoo, Microsoft and Ask, as they are the most widely used (Lewandowski, 2008).

The presence of tourism in each destination as provided by each of the four search engines

was measured in two steps. Firstly, the presence of tourism in general was measured for each group (capital and non-capital cities). Secondly, the procedure continued with an analysis of the presence of tourism in terms of tourist categories for each city group. In order to do that, the name of the city and the term "tourism" or the name of each of the nine tourist categories were entered together as search keywords in the four search engines used here. Search results were noted as follows: the total number of indexed websites and the number of results found by the engine. These measures were then used to calculate the visibility ratio for each question, dividing the number of results found by the total number of websites indexed in the search engine (Xiang *et al.*, 2008). The data for this study were collected during the third quarter of 2010.

Results

Table 1 shows the results of the European tourist destinations that are the country's capital city and not capitals. Tourist destinations in grey shade are those with highest visibility ratios, while those with the lowest ratios are not shaded. The results of this analysis indicate that London, Paris and Berlin were the capitals destinations which provide lower visibility ratio. In contrast, Tallinn, Reykjavik and Bratislava obtain the highest. Similarly, Nice, Hamburg and Barcelona were the non-capital tourist destinations which presented lower visibility ratio, while Gothenburg, Benidorm and Bruges offer the highest visibility ratio. Furthermore, regarding to visibility ratio, there are no significant differences between destinations that are country capitals and those that are not.

Analyses were also conducted to assess the presence of the tourist destinations in the search engines selected according to the tourist categories and are presented in Table 2; as can be seen, it focuses on highest and lowest presence of tourist categories in the four search engines where tourist destinations in grey shade are those with highest visibility ratios, while those with the lowest ratios are not shaded. The results of this effort show that "information," "events" and "shopping" yield the lower visibility ratio mainly in capital destinations, although there are relevant varia-

Table 1. Representation of tourism in European destinations in search engines

GOOGLE		YAHOO		MICROSOFT		ASK	
Capitals	Visibility ratio (%)	Capitals	Visibility ratio (%)	Capitals	Visibility ratio (%)	Capitals	Visibility ratio (%)
London	0.0001	London	0.0003	London	0.0003	London	0.0003
Paris	0.0002	Berlin	0.0004	Paris	0.0004	Berlin	0.0006
Madrid	0.0004	Paris	0.0004	Berlin	0.0004	Paris	0.0006
Lisbon	0.0053	Tallinn	0.0080	Tallinn	0.0081	Bratislava	0.0391
Warsaw	0.0042	Bratislava	0.0102	Bratislava	0.0101	Reykjavik	0.0514
Reykjavik	0.0065	Reykjavik	0.0215	Reykjavik	0.0223	Tallinn	0.0538
Non-Capitals	Visibility ratio (%)	Non-Capitals	Visibility ratio (%)	Non-Capitals	Visibility ratio (%)	Non-Capitals	Visibility ratio (%)
Nice	0.0002	Nice	0.0002	Nice	0.0002	Nice	0.0003
Barcelona	0.0006	Hamburg	0.0007	Hamburg	0.0006	Manchester	0.0013
Manchester	0.0006	Barcelona	0.0011	Barcelona	0.0011	Hamburg	0.0013
Krakov	0.0078	Bruges	0.0183	Bruges	0.0176	Bruges	0.0502
Gothenburg	0.0085	Gothenburg	0.0267	Gothenburg	0.0242	Gothenburg	0.0506
Benidorm	0.0130	Benidorm	0.0284	Benidorm	0.0281	Benidorm	0.0726

Table 2. Highest and lowest presence of tourist categories in search engines

	GOOGLE		YAHOO		MICROSOFT		ASK	
	Destination	Visibility ratio (%)	Destination	Visibility ratio (%)	Destination	Visibility Ratio (%)	Destination	Visibility Ratio (%)
Accommodation	Gothenburg	0.2859	Bruges	0.2519	Gothenburg	0.3448	Gothenburg	0.9950
	London	0.0020	London	0.0023	London	0.0021	London	0.0057
Activities	Benidorm	0.2224	Benidorm	0.2410	Benidorm	0.2915	Benidorm	0.7752
	London	0.0007	Nice	0.0007	London	0.0013	London	0.0033
Areas	Benidorm	0.2508	Benidorm	0.2950	Benidorm	0.2985	Benidorm	0.8403
	Paris	0.0006	London	0.0007	London	0.0010	London	0.0025
Attractions	Helsinki	0.3447	Benidorm	0.3247	Bratislava	0.3690	Bratislava	1.4925
	London	0.0027	Nice	0.0042	London	0.0045	London	0.0074
Events	Benidorm	0.2463	Benidorm	0.2370	Benidorm	0.3257	Benidorm	0.8130
	London	0.0003	Nice	0.0005	Nice	0.0008	London	0.0011
Information	Benidorm	0.0892	Benidorm	0.0962	Benidorm	0.1065	Benidorm	0.2139
	London	0.0001	Nice	0.0004	London	0.0005	London	0.0007
Restaurants	Krakov	0.1769	Krakov	0.1550	Reykjavik	0.2037	Bratislava	0.6116
	Nice	0.0011	Nice	0.0011	Nice	0.0015	Nice	0.0037
Shopping	Stockholm	0.1991	Gothenburg	0.1603	Benidorm	0.2381	Gothenburg	0.6920
	Luxembourg	0.0005	Nice	0.0005	Nice	0.0008	London	0.0024
Places	Benidorm	0.2172	Benidorm	0.0862	Benidorm	0.2632	Innsbruck	0.4902
	Nice	0.0005	Nice	0.0003	Nice	0.0011	Nice	0.0022

tions for each destination and search engine. Important, the results indicate that destinations with the biggest number of indexed websites correspond to the lowest visibility ratio. It is also relevant that the capitals with lowest visibility in search engines are exactly those that receive the greatest number of visitors.

Conclusion

The findings of the research revealed interesting dynamics in some of the key areas in online tourism. Firstly, the results obtained in this study indicate that although search engines index a huge number of websites with tourist content, the actual visibility and accessibility of websites created by tourist organizations related to the different destinations is quite low (Xiang *et al.*, 2008). The low visibility of tourist websites in search engines reveals that there are few opportunities for actual interaction between online tourists and tourist businesses. It is, therefore, necessary to design tools for quicker and more effective information search, as well as strategies for better indexing capacity, improved information organization and useful (relevant and updated) information discrimination in all search fields, including tourism. Secondly, this study provides an understanding of the search queries employed. When specific keywords are used for online search, the search engines retrieve hundreds of websites containing them; however, only the most relevant and better designed websites, according to the search engine criteria, will be visible in the engine. It is therefore logical to assume that good-quality website design improves visibility. Finally, the research analyses the possible differences between search engines. From the results obtained here, we can conclude that there are no important differences between Google, Microsoft and Ask. However, Yahoo retrieved a significantly higher number of indexed websites, as a consequence of which it provides lower visibility ratios.

The results of the study offer some important managerial implications as tourism marketers are facing challenges resulting from the shift in distribution channels and the emergence of new media (Fesenmaier, 2007; Fesenmaier *et al.*, 2011). In response to these changes, tourist organizations should make sure they are

present in a significant number of search engines, because a high percentage of tourists use search engines and websites to make their buying decision. It would then be interesting for a tourist business that designs strategies to make sure that users will visualize their services in the search engine (Gretzel and Wöber, 2004; Ricci *et al.*, 2005; Wöber, 2007; Wolk and Wöber, 2008). In this sense, Search Engine Marketing (SEM) is important in that it increases website visibility in online search engines (Xiang *et al.*, 2009; Pan *et al.*, 2011).

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