

Destination marketing organization website features: cross-continental comparative analysis

Youssef El Archi*

Széchenyi István University, Győr, Hungary; Centre for Tourism Research, Development and Innovation (CiTUR), Polytechnic Institute of Leiria, Portugal

Brahim Benbba

National School of Business and Management of Tangier, Abdelmalek Essaadi University, Morocco

Lucília Cardoso

Centre for Tourism Research, Development and Innovation (CiTUR), Polytechnic Institute of Leiria, Portugal

Carla Fraga

Department of Tourism, Federal University of Juiz de Fora (UFJF), Brazil

Destination marketing organization (DMO) websites play a crucial role in influencing destination choice as more tourists in the digital age rely on the internet for travel-related information. This research note compares the functionality of DMO websites across three continents: Africa, Latin America, and Europe focusing on three countries (Morocco, Brazil, and Portugal). Based on an extensive framework developed by Li and Wang, this study carefully classifies and assesses website features using six dimensions (information, communication, transaction, relationship, technical merit, and brand gestalt cognition). The results offer destination marketing managers significant insights that aid in gap analysis and the improvement of website functionalities. In addition, the results of the research are applicable for evaluating website effectiveness and for deriving conclusions concerning management and business strategies. This research is also important for destinations as it provides practical opportunities for improving DMO websites, enhancing user engagement, and shaping destination choices in modern times.

Keywords: *Brand gestalt cognition, Content analysis, Cross-continental comparative analysis, Destination marketing organization, Destination websites*

1 INTRODUCTION

Over the past few decades, technological innovations have generated radical changes in the hospitality and tourism industry (Pencarelli, 2020). Today's travelers can easily access the internet, making it very convenient for planning tourist destinations.

* Email: elarchi.youssef@etu.uae.ac.ma.

The main source of information has shifted from traditional media to digital platforms (Mieli and Zillinger, 2020). The use of internet technologies to optimize operations and communication is virtually universal among hotels and tourism organizations. Destination marketing is essential for enhancing the visibility and attractiveness of a destination – whether it a country, region, state, or city – within highly competitive markets (Buhalis, 2000).

The purpose of destination marketing organizations (DMOs) is to plan and execute all actions aimed at promoting tourist destinations according to their defined strategies (Foris et al., 2020). As websites become the primary medium for disseminating information about a destination to potential travelers, DMOs have emerged as key gatekeepers in shaping the public image of tourist destinations and ensuring long-term growth (Mak, 2017).

DMO websites serve as the central hub for visitor information, offering an intricate network of hyperlinks that connect the destination DMO with its partners. The structure and content of these sites (one-party mediated elements), along with their hyperlink networks (two-party mediated elements), can reveal sociocultural differences among communities. These differences may shape the expectations of travelers from various cultural backgrounds even before they begin their information search, influencing the initial impressions potential tourists form of the destination (Park and Stepchenkova, 2023).

It is widely recognized that tourists' decisions made prior to departure significantly influence their subsequent choices during their vacation (Backhaus et al., 2023). Consequently, DMO websites must provide comprehensive information tailored to satisfy the diverse needs of tourists at different stages of trip planning. All the information provided creates an image of the destination in the tourist's mind, i.e. the image of the destination's brand (Tasci and Kozak, 2006). This projection of the destination brand image must be done holistically involving a cognitive process since brand cognition plays an important role in tourists' decisions (Wang et al., 2023). The holistic perception of the destination, how tourists perceive the destination's brand rather than a collection of individual elements, is achieved if the DMO's website incorporates the brand gestalt approach (Rodriguez et al., 2013).

In today's digital environment, visitors are increasingly engaging with blogs, travel sites, Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, and other social media platforms (Kumar et al., 2022). Contemporary DMO websites are subjected to Web 2.0, implemented especially in influencing consumer choices and behaviors in the travel-planning phase (Kumar et al., 2022). Destination images are an important factor in tourists' decisions and travel behaviors (Kim et al., 2021), and today's travelers increasingly rely on online social media platforms and search engines to gather necessary travel information (Oliveira et al., 2020).

Pai et al. (2014) evaluated the efficiency of DMO websites in Japan, Thailand, Korea, Hong Kong, and Macao and revealed statistical scores that ranked Macao the lowest of the four destinations. Chek and Lei (2020) have also studied the DMO websites of Hong Kong, Macao, and South Korea, finding that Hong Kong holds a leading position. Even in the crowded social media landscape, a DMO website remains important as an official voice representing destination perspectives (Ip et al., 2011) and can significantly influence tourists' choice of destination. A well-executed DMO website, filled with quality information and user-friendly tools, has the potential to convert a tentative visitor into an actual traveler.

A new framework for “digital destination branding” was developed by Confetto et al. (2023), primarily focusing on DMO websites. The term “DDB” encompasses a

wide range of branding strategies and efforts that leverage the digital landscape to raise awareness of destinations, engage travelers, and create a holistic experience.

Successful DMO websites are characterized by their ability to effectively integrate communication tools, e-commerce capabilities, destination information, and relationship-building strategies with technical expertise and dynamic marketing approaches (Wang and Russo, 2007).

This research note aims to conduct a comparative analysis of DMO website functionalities, focusing particularly on comparing Moroccan, Portuguese, and Brazilian DMO websites. By identifying gaps, this study aims to assist the three DMOs in enhancing their websites as a potent marketing tool, providing fresh insights and directions for improvement.

This study distinguishes itself from others employing the same framework by incorporating a new dimension focused on brand gestalt cognition and offering a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding.

2 METHODOLOGY

As stated by Li and Wang (2010), there are five central dimensions used in assessing DMO websites: technical merit, communication, information supply, relationship management, and transaction ability. Usually, the website evaluation looks at its usability, design, and functionality; being that most areas are placed under these three major categories (Park and Gretzel, 2007).

Usability and functionality criteria, which include web layout interface design and aesthetics, are the main factors that determine how effective a website is (Law et al., 2010; Lei and Law, 2019). Although previous research has typically focused only on usability or functionality, this study attempts to fully incorporate both into its assessment process. This study evaluation model is based on a foundational framework that Li and Wang (2010) developed for evaluating Chinese Provincial Tourism Administrations' (PTAs) websites.

To complement the holistic vision of the destination brand, this study incorporates the brand gestalt cognition theory. Consumers perceive the brand with a holistic perception shaped by cohesive visual elements like logos and colors, unified identity, consistency (across all brand elements and touchpoints reinforces the brand gestalt), and emotional connections fostered through consistent messaging and brand environment (Diamond et al., 2009; Mohamed and Adiloglu, 2023). In this way, this study uses the principles of brand gestalt theory to integrate brand equity through its elements: visual identity (logo colors and design) (Rodriguez et al., 2013); verbal identity (brand's name, tagline, messaging, and tone of (Diamond et al., 2009); product destination experience (the type of experience in destination) (Jeon et al., 2018); destination brand tourist experience (brand interactions, e.g. social media) (Jiménez-Barreto et al., 2020); and destination brand sensory elements (sensory interactions, e.g., sound and touch) (Woojin Lee et al., 2010).

Based on this framework, the study used a content analysis approach concentrating on DMO websites from three different tourism destinations: Morocco, Portugal, and Brazil. The English-language versions of these websites are specifically taken into account in the evaluation. The rationale for choosing DMO websites from Morocco, Brazil, and Portugal was researched to depict a large variety of geographical, cultural, and economic contexts across three continents. They were chosen because they have robust tourism sectors and their economies heavily depend on tourism and also due

to their strategic importance in global tourism, representing emerging and developed markets. Also, each of the countries has a variety of tourist attractions targeting diverse types of holiday-makers, thus enabling comprehensive examination on how DMO websites are used to market different destinations. Additionally, each author of this study represents one of these countries, bringing in-depth local knowledge and insights into the analysis.

The study focused on English versions of the DMO websites to ensure consistency in the analysis and also reach out to a wider international audience. Nonetheless, it is essential to note that this might introduce certain biases because translation/localization may not always capture cultural nuances or promotional strategies that would naturally cater to local people in any given area (Table 1).

Using predefined dimensions and attributes derived from a specific framework (Li and Wang, 2010), the content analysis method used here facilitates both quantitative and qualitative assessment. In all, 53 attributes total dispersed across six dimensions comprise the evaluation criteria: technical merit (8 items); relationship (10 items); information (18 items); communication (7 items); transaction (5 items); and brand gestalt cognition (5 items). To ensure a comprehensive and consistent analysis, the attributes of each dimension were applied methodically to the evaluation of website elements. Features found on the websites were given a checkmark (✓) if they fit into one of the designated evaluation categories. The evaluation tool for this study is based on well-established literature and offers a solid framework for evaluating DMO website functionality in a variety of dimensions and geographical contexts.

3 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Information dimension

The information dimension evaluates how well each destination marketing organization (DMO) website provides essential details to potential tourists (Table 2).

Morocco's website immediately captures visitors' attention with its expansive range of interactive and visually appealing features. The homepage prominently displays tourist activities under the "See and Do" section, allowing users to explore a variety of experiences. The clear layout of information helps users easily access maps, directions, and destination background details, all positioned strategically within the main navigation bars. Despite the comprehensive information provided, the themed products are embedded within different menus, which may require visitors to explore more deeply to discover specific interests.

Portugal's DMO website offers a slightly different approach, positioning tourist activities under the "What to do" menu, encompassing 15 links that cover a wide range of experiences. However, the categorization could be more intuitive, as some of the

Table 1 DMO websites of the three countries

Destination	Name of DMO website	URL
Morocco	Visit Morocco	https://www.visitmorocco.com/
Portugal	Visit Portugal	https://www.visitportugal.com/
Brazil	Visit Brasil	https://visitbrasil.com/

Table 2 Information dimension features

Dimension	Attributes (items)	Morocco	Portugal	Brazil
Information	Attraction information	✓	✓	✓
	Activities information	✓	✓	✓
	Maps and directions	✓	✓	✓
	Destination background information	✓	✓	✓
	Themed products	✓	✓	✓
	Transportation information	✓	✓	✓
	Events calendar	n/a	✓	n/a
	Restaurant information	n/a	✓	n/a
	Travel guides/brochures	✓	✓	n/a
	Travel agents	n/a	✓	n/a
	Accommodation information	✓	✓	n/a
	Travel packages	n/a	n/a	n/a
	Entertainment information	✓	✓	✓
	Local weather information	n/a	✓	n/a
	Shopping information	✓	n/a	n/a
	Travel tips	✓	✓	✓
	Trip/vacation planner	✓	✓	✓
	Linked to regional/city/area pages	✓	✓	✓

links are less obvious than expected. The site does a commendable job in terms of providing maps, directions, and destination background information but falters slightly by not integrating an events calendar. The restaurant information, while available, is tucked within a search engine in the “Looking for” menu, which may not be immediately apparent to users.

Brazil’s website differs slightly, offering activities that are not immediately visible on the homepage but accessible after navigating through submenus. This approach might challenge users who prefer instant access to information. Maps and directions are provided under specific destination menus, offering clear navigation aids to users. While background information about destinations is readily available, the themed products, similar to Morocco’s website, are hidden within submenus, demanding extra clicks from users. Brazil’s website lacks an events calendar, which is a missed opportunity to engage visitors interested in time-sensitive activities. Additionally, specific restaurant information is not available, and while the website includes general gastronomy information, it may not be sufficient for those seeking detailed dining options.

Travel tips, accommodations, travel packages, and entertainment details are usually shared among all three internet sites, thereby making it easy to access them although they do not come out clear at first glance. These websites may not be very useful for travelers who want to make direct bookings since they lack commercial accommodations and travel packages. However, all three sites stand out when it comes to practical guidance on things such as visa requirements, currency exchange rates, and other travel necessities, enabling users to be fully equipped for their journeys.

3.2 Communication dimension

The communication dimension indicates how well each DMO website has promoted dialogue and engagement with its users. All three sites featuring Morocco, Portugal,

and Brazil have included a search function in their main menu so that users can get detailed information as fast as possible. Brazil's search function is prominently placed at the top right corner of the website, enabling easy access, while that of Morocco and Portugal is included in the main menu, hence maintaining the websites' appearance.

As far as interactive involvement is concerned, both Morocco and Brazil include multiple social media links for enhanced sharing potentials and engagements with their respective online communities. For instance, Brazil has connections with seven different social networking sites on its website, rendering it highly dynamic and versatile. On the same note, Morocco also has a strong online visibility due to its five integrated social media accounts, enabling interactions with the world despite being less complex than the Portuguese site where users are allowed to share materials straight from their page but do not have extensive links to other social networks (Table 3).

Moreover, all of the websites do not have sophisticated interactive platforms, such as online forums, comment boxes, online surveys, or FAQs, that could offer visitors some means to inquire about things, share their thoughts, or get involved in conversations. The lack thereof may curtail user involvement and collection of response that are crucial for the ongoing enhancement and contentment of visitors. Moreover, only Morocco's website features an email newsletter option. In this case, email can be viewed as an effective method to keep in touch with prospective tourists and update them on the latest events, initiatives, and promotion.

3.3 Transaction dimension

The transaction dimension is critical in determining DMO websites' e-commerce designs needed to ensure that online visits are turned into actual bookings. Unfortunately, none of the Moroccan, Portuguese, or Brazilian websites have the capability of booking online, facilitating secure transactions or systems for buying attraction tickets or event tickets directly from their sites. The absence of these features may lead to travelers planning trips and making bookings through various platforms, rather than via DMOs, which could lead to loss of control over the user's experience branding (Table 4).

In addition to that, the absence of shopping carts on all the above-mentioned websites as this prevents tourism operators from cashing on their experiences through the sale of branded commodities besides travel-related products. Although these sites are rich in information, the absence of direct booking and purchasing options limits their utility for travelers who prefer a seamless, one-stop-shop experience.

Table 3 Communication dimension features

Dimension	Attributes (items)	Morocco	Portugal	Brazil
Communication	Search function	✓	✓	✓
	Interactive communication tools	✓	✓	✓
	Online forum	n/a	n/a	n/a
	Comment box	n/a	n/a	n/a
	Online survey	n/a	n/a	n/a
	Frequently asked questions	n/a	n/a	n/a
	Email newsletter	✓	n/a	n/a

Table 4 Transaction dimension features

Dimension	Attributes (items)	Morocco	Portugal	Brazil
Transaction	Online reservation	n/a	n/a	n/a
	Secure transaction	n/a	n/a	n/a
	Attraction tickets	n/a	n/a	n/a
	Events tickets	n/a	n/a	n/a
	Shopping carts	n/a	n/a	n/a

Table 5 Relationship dimension features

Dimension	Attributes (items)	Morocco	Portugal	Brazil
Relationship	Personalization	n/a	n/a	n/a
	Complaints handling	n/a	n/a	n/a
	Best deals	n/a	n/a	n/a
	Virtual tours	n/a	n/a	✓
	Cross-selling opportunities	n/a	n/a	n/a
	Privacy policy	✓	✓	✓
	Special offers	n/a	n/a	n/a
	Web seal certification	n/a	✓	n/a
	Customer loyalty programs	n/a	n/a	n/a
	Incentive programs	n/a	n/a	n/a

3.4 Relationship dimension

The relationship dimension explores how well the websites build and maintain connections with users, ensuring a long-term engagement with the destination brand. Unfortunately, none of the three websites offer personalization features, which could have tailored the user experience to individual preferences, enhancing visitor satisfaction. Similarly, the lack of complaints handling mechanisms and best deal notifications means that these websites miss opportunities to resolve visitor issues in real time and offer special promotions that could encourage bookings.

However, Brazil's website distinguishes itself by providing a 360° virtual tour titled "Amazonia Viva," which offers an immersive experience that allows users to explore the Amazon virtually. This feature stands out as a unique method of engaging visitors and promoting the destination in an interactive and memorable way. The absence of virtual tours on the Morocco and Portugal websites suggests a missed opportunity to leverage technology to enhance visitor engagement and provide a preview of the travel experience (Table 5).

All three websites include a privacy policy, ensuring that users are informed about how their data is collected and used. Brazil's privacy policy is especially prominent, presented as a pop-up, which immediately captures the user's attention. Portugal and Morocco, on the other hand, place their privacy policies at the bottom of the main menu under "Terms of Use," making them accessible but not immediately noticeable. Portugal's website goes a step further by displaying three web seal certifications (Compete 2020, QREN 2007-2013, "Fundo Europeu de Desenvolvimento Regional"), which enhance the site's credibility and assure visitors of its compliance with industry standards. The absence of similar certifications on the Morocco and Brazil websites might reduce the perceived trustworthiness of users unfamiliar with the destinations.

3.5 Technical merit dimension

The technical merit dimension evaluates the overall usability, design, and functionality of DMO websites – all of which are essential in creating a seamless and interesting user experience. Each of the websites from Morocco, Portugal, and Brazil has maintained good search engine visibility, which makes them easily findable to potential travelers over the internet. This is important as it is this category that attracts global travelers who use search engines looking for travel information (Table 6).

The overall web page design for each site is practical to provide an inviting atmosphere for visitors. The designs correspond to specific destination brand images whereby Morocco's richness in culture is highlighted; Portugal on its past years of trade through the sea while Brazil goes more for its colorful scenery. However, there are differences in performance among these websites depending on the geographical location of users; some menus take longer than others to load particularly those whose language is different from that used in designing them. Loading times may fluctuate resulting in boredom on the part of users such as those using slow internet connections.

All three websites offer similar navigational ease, thanks to their explicit menus and rational flow from one section to another. It is this navigational ease that ensures users get what they are looking for without going all over the place or getting lost. The aspect of appearance is also important since all the sites utilize colors, images, and spatial arrangement in a way that enhances destination branding, making it happen smoothly without interruptions.

A site map showing the location of various sections in any particular site can often be found on the bottom of the main menu bar as part of each of these websites, enabling search for specific parts on it by visitors. By offering multiple languages such as 11 in Morocco, 10 in Portugal, and 3 in Brazil render them accessible to a wider audience globally, therefore improving user experience overall. This however might reflect the main target markets and the international tourism strategy.

3.6 Brand gestalt dimension

The brand gestalt dimension delves into the visual and verbal identities projected by each website, encapsulating the essence of the destination through logos, slogans, and overall design language.

Table 6 Technical merit dimension features

Dimension	Attributes (items)	Morocco	Portugal	Brazil
Technical merit	Search engine recognition	✓	✓	✓
	Webpage design	✓	✓	✓
	Link check	✓	✓	✓
	Load time	✓	✓	✓
	Navigation	✓	✓	✓
	Visual appearance	✓	✓	✓
	Site map	✓	✓	✓
	Multiple languages	✓	✓	✓

One of the six dimensions used to evaluate DMO websites is brand gestalt cognition, which has been added to the existing framework of five dimensions. Its importance lies in assessing how effectively the websites present a unified and integrated brand image of the location to prospective travelers. Through an analysis of brand gestalt cognition, the study examines how well each destination marketing organization (DMO) website conveys the destination’s overall identity, values, and emotional appeal to its target audience (Table 7).

Morocco’s website is easily recognizable thanks to its unique logo, which features dry pink, white, and earth tones on a blue backdrop. This color scheme complements the nation’s image as a mysterious and vibrant cultural destination, symbolizing purity, tranquility, and cultural heritage. The tagline “Kingdom of Light” enhances this appeal by evoking visions of an exotic and enlightening journey. The use of geometric patterns, rooted in Moroccan art, strengthens the brand’s cultural resonance and contributes to the development of a charming and favorable brand image.

Portugal’s website showcases a logo that incorporates the green, red, and yellow colors of the national flag, along with blue waves to represent the nation’s maritime history and its connections to exploration and discovery throughout the ages. Its design exudes warmth, hospitality, and history, making it a desirable travel destination. However, the absence of a slogan on the website creates a gap in the brand’s verbal communication, which could have otherwise strengthened its identity and established a deeper emotional connection with users.

Brazil’s brand identity is embodied in its colorful logo, which represents the country’s rich natural beauty, abundant resources, and multicultural society through the national colors of green, yellow, blue, and white. The abstract design captures Brazil’s energy, diversity, and warmth, resulting in a vibrant and captivating brand image. The logo’s emotional appeal and straightforward design make it instantly recognizable and memorable. This design subtly conveys Brazil’s commitment to sustainability, aligning with the global movement toward eco-friendly travel.

4 CONCLUSION

The DMO websites of Morocco, Portugal, and Brazil were the focus of a cross-continental comparative analysis in this study. Li and Wang’s (2010) methodology and brand gestalt cognition theory served as the foundation for the content analysis

Table 7 Brand gestalt cognition dimension features

Dimension	Attributes (items)	Morocco	Portugal	Brazil
Brand gestalt cognition	Visual identity	✓	✓	✓
	Verbal identity	✓	n/a	n/a
	Product destination experience	✓	✓	✓
	Destination brand tourist experience	✓	n/a	✓
	Destination brand sensory elements	Partly	Partly	✓

approach. The results reveal varying strengths and weaknesses across six dimensions: information, communication, transaction, relationship, technical merit, and brand gestalt. While each website effectively captures the unique personality of its destination, significant gaps remain, particularly in terms of transactional features and user engagement.

These shortcomings suggest that DMOs would benefit from enhancing personalized user experiences, interactive communication tools, and e-commerce integration. However, the study's conclusions are limited by the scope of the attributes examined and the static nature of website evaluation, which may not accurately reflect the dynamic user interactions that occur in real-time.

Morocco should enhance user engagement on its DMO websites by adding an events calendar and making themed products more accessible. Portugal could benefit from a catchy tagline, improved activity categorization, and more engaging content, such as virtual tours. To enhance user communication, Brazil should implement an events calendar, highlight important activities more prominently on the homepage, and include interactive elements. These enhancements will strengthen the websites' ability to assist travelers and effectively promote their destination brands.

The conclusions of the analysis extend beyond the three countries studied, providing valuable insights for DMOs worldwide. The framework can be applied in various contexts, helping DMOs improve user interaction, website functionality, and audience engagement.

To provide a more comprehensive assessment of the efficacy of DMO websites, future research should consider incorporating more sophisticated analytics and user feedback. Additionally, it should account for native languages to create a holistic understanding of the roles that DMO websites play within various linguistic and societal contexts.

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