

Measuring the efficiency of an official destination website: the case of *incredibleindia.org*

by

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Abstract

Over the years, the Internet has become a key communication channel for destinations around the world. Destinations are developing websites dedicated solely to the promotion of tourism in the region, called official destination websites (ODWs). However, in a highly competitive market, the ODWs need to be really effective in order to convert website user into destination visitors. India too, has developed its tourism website, www.incredibleindia.com, with the aim of increasing its share in the international tourist arrivals. The aim of this study is to evaluate the efficiency of Indian tourism website by identifying certain key attributes of a destination website from the existing studies and evaluation frameworks. The website was then analyzed with the presence of identified attributes.

Keywords: Indian tourism, official destination website, website evaluation

Introduction:

The uplifting financial impact that tourism has on the economies around the world has been established beyond doubt (Sequeira & Maçãs Nunes, 2008). In 2018, the travel and tourism industry supported 319 million jobs (i.e. 10% of total global employment) and generated 10.4% of world GDP (World Travel and Tourism Council, 2019a a). The number of international arrivals around the globe has increased remarkably from 25 million in 1950 to around 684 million in 2000. The number of international arrivals crossed 1 billion mark for the first time in the year 2012 (World Tourism Organization, 2013). This number was a little more than 1.4 billion in 2018, two years ahead of the forecast (World Tourism Organization, 2019). The sector has thus shown strength and resilience to occasional shocks like the incidents of economic depression and rise in global terrorism and has grown continuously. The increase in the number of tourist arrivals has been particularly impressive in the Middle East and the developing nations (World Tourism Organization, 2019).

In India too, the travel and tourism industry has a significant contribution to its economy. In 2018, it contributed 9.2% to India's GDP and created 42 million jobs, i.e. 8.1% of total employment. For the same period, India earned a total of US\$ 28.9 billion in international visitor spending. Interestingly, this amounts to only 13% of total travel and tourism spending, and the rest

of it comes from domestic tourism (World Travel and Tourism Council, 2019 b). Thus, it can be said conclusively that tourism is a vital sector for the development of a country and needs to be promoted.

Till a decade ago, destinations used print advertisements and TV commercials to promote themselves. However, as tourism is growing more and more competitive, the Internet has become the preferred channel for promotion and communication. Potential tourists, nowadays, chose to search for travel-related information online (Jang, 2004). People use the Internet to search for information like transportation, hotels and restaurants, suggested itineraries, languages, visa policies. People now prefer to book tickets online rather than through ticket booking outlets (C. Kim, 2006). It was found that 95% of the Internet users, looked at the World Wide Web (WWW) to search for travel-related information (Lehto, Kim, & M, 2006).

The increasing acceptance of online marketing has compelled the destinations around the world to adopt the Internet as their primary marketing channel. Destinations have been designing websites to represent and promote themselves, called official destination websites or ODWs (Law, Qi, & Buhalis, 2010). While various free, Internet-based information channels like blogs (Çakmak & Isaac, 2012) and social media (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010) are available, OWDs are regarded as the most reliable source of information because they formally represent their destinations (Bastida & Huan, 2014). The importance of OWDs can be assumed from the fact that 93% of the potential tourists visit the destination website to gather information (Lehto et al., 2006).

An ODW can act as a cornerstone around which all the digital activities are centered. Centralization of online activities has dual benefits, both for the destination and the users. Since all the information is available on the website and is updated regularly, the destination can easily extend its promotional activities to other online platforms. This helps users too, as they do not need to visit the website regularly and can seek further contact through online channels and platforms of their choice. Destination websites influence users' intention to visit the destination (Kaplanidou & Vogt, 2006). They can help in forming a positive perception about the place (Melo, 2013).

The importance of an ODW for the popularization and promotion of a destination has been well established. India too understands the potential of an ODW and therefore deployed its website *www.incredibleindia.org* way back in 2002 as a part of an international campaign maintained by the Government of India to promote tourism (Kant, 2009). The campaign, however, was cast away in the bureaucratic mismanagement. The Ministry of Tourism, Govt of India relaunched the campaign as "Incredible India 2.0" in September 2017 with a revamped version of the website being launched 14th June 2018 (Ministry of Tourism, Government of India, 2019). The new website of Incredible India is aesthetically pleasing and offers certain new features. However, there are areas where the website can improve its functionalities. This paper aims to analyze and evaluate the newly launched website of Incredible India.

Literature Review:

Travel-related information search on the Internet:

Kim and Fesenmaier (2008) explained that travel planners might choose one of the two strategies to search for information online. First, they may enter the web address (URL) of the website if they have already determined which site to visit. However, in the absence or lack of information on travel websites, they often choose the second strategy, i.e. to formulate a query and execute a search in any search engine of preference (e.g. Google) where the user is presented with relevant results based on the keywords they entered. Online information search comprises of three stages: (i) search, (ii) primacy, and (iii) elaboration (Figure 1). During the search stage, people use

a search engine where they enter related keywords to retrieve relevant search results and the required information. After receiving a list of search results from the search engine, people enter the primacy stage. During this stage, people select and visit the most relevant and promising website from the results. During the primacy stage, depending on the first impression created by the website, the user may stay on the website and explore further or may exit it to return to the search results. They then choose and click on another hyperlink from the listed results and follow the same pattern until they find the desired information.

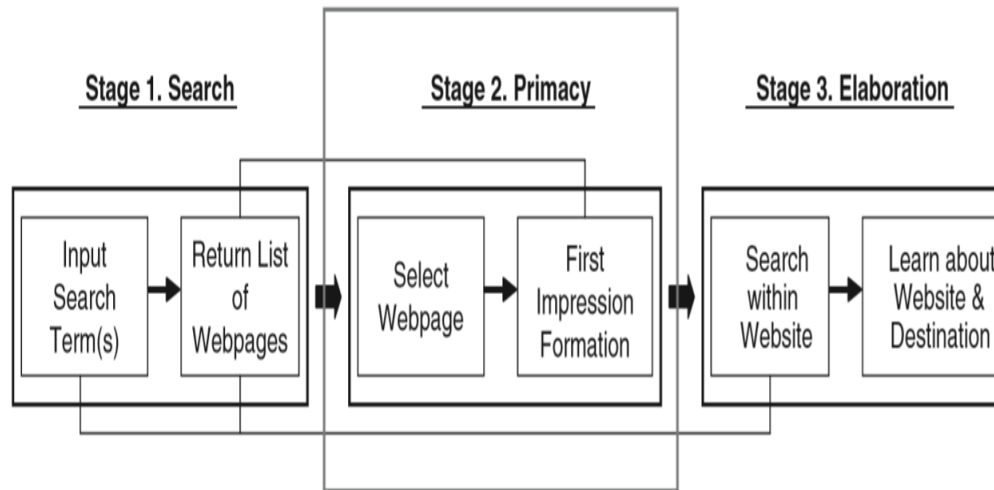


Fig. 1. The process of travel-related online information search¹

It has been observed that it takes only two to seven seconds for users to develop an initial impression of the website (D.-Y. Kim, Hwang, & Fesenmaier, 2005). Moreover, they can assess a website's visual appeal within 50 ms (Lindgaard, Fernandes, Dudek, & Brown, 2006). The fact that it takes only seconds to form an impression of the website, it is important for a website to "evoke a favourable initial impression at the moment when information searchers access it, because they can easily leave the site through one-time click to find another potentially more persuasive website" (H. Kim & Fesenmaier, 2008, p. 8). An effective first impression is extremely crucial for a website as it can discourage visitors to visit alternative websites, thus boosting total assessments of the website (Lindgaard et al., 2006). Hence, the website needs to be highly engaging.

Destination website evaluation:

Many studies have attempted to measure the quality of tourism websites, including hotel websites, airline websites, destination websites, and travel agency websites. Each of these studies uses its own evaluation approach and framework. The different approaches to website evaluation can be categorised into five types: (i) counting, (ii) user judgment, (iii) automated, (iv) numerical computation, and (v) combined methods (Law et al., 2010). In counting method, we simply count the number of features and information offered by a tourism website. User judgment method is based on users' feedback to measure their satisfaction or perceptions with a Likert Scale.

¹ H. Kim & Fesenmaier, 2008.

Automated methods involve the evaluation of websites through dedicated software systems to record website usage data and metrics. The numerical approach makes use of formulae or mathematical modelling to measure or predict a website's performance. Lastly, the combined method uses two or more of the approaches mentioned above at once.

Website evaluation can help identify web design standards for improved online promotional strategies. A poorly constructed website can foster negative beliefs that encourage website departure and alternative seeking. 40% of consumers never return to a website after a negative experience (Manning, McCarthy, & Souza, 1998). Nevertheless, there is no universally-accepted strategy for tourism website evaluation (Law et al., 2010). This is partly because previous studies used their own evaluation tools and these tools, in turn, measure their own set of website quality attributes depending on the type of destination websites (national, regional, and local). For example, for US and Canadian tourists, information related to accommodations, events, tourist attractions, activities, maps, were most important (Choi, Lehto, & O'Leary, 2007). For Chinese Provincial Tourism Administrations' websites, the information dimension was found out to be of most importance (Li & Wang, 2010). An analysis of Taiwan's tourism websites from the perspective of western tourists reveals that the key attributes were destination information, download speed, graphics and images, maps and itineraries, hotel booking services, and travel agent contacts (Davidson & Yu, 2005). Thus, a wide range of evaluation techniques and website quality attributes makes it challenging to establish a standardized evaluation methodology and hence, comparing the findings of one study to another becomes very difficult.

Methodology:

The proposed evaluation model in this study uses the counting method, one of the five evaluation approaches pointed out by Law, Qi, and Buhalis (2010). They further specified that for evaluation by the counting method, "a well-prepared checklist is required to verify the existence of attributes on a website." These attributes are considered essential for the effectiveness of a website. In order to prepare this checklist, a careful and thorough study of the literature was done. The study by Law, Qi and Buhalis (2010), which reviews website evaluation in tourism research was found to be very valuable. The paper reviews the tourism studies published from 1996 to July 2009. More specific information was gathered by doing a backward chronological search of this study. For the later period, different combinations of keywords like website, DMO, OWD, destination website, evaluation, etc. were used to search journal databases and gather more information. After a successful collection of the most essential and relevant attributes, they were classified into different categories depending on their functionality on the website.

Again, prior studies and researchers have differed on the categorization of attributes. Wang and Russo (2007) argued that a successful destination website depends on the integrative application of the following components as its primary function: (i) up-to-date and accurate destination information provision, (ii) effective and constant communication with consumers, (iii) reliable and seamless electronic transaction, and (iv) appropriate and sustainable relationship-building programs. While, Li and Wang (2010) suggest that a website should be evaluated on the following five dimensions: (i) technical merit, (ii) information, (iii) communication, (iv) transaction and (v) relationship. They further argue that all five dimensions interlink with each other. Also, that technical merit dimension directly affects the performance of the other four dimensions.

For the scope of this study, we use the categorization suggested by Fernández-Cavia et al. (2014, p. 4). They termed it as "an integrated, interdisciplinary model combining quantitative and qualitative data in order to encompass all aspects that are of importance in any website." They suggest that an evaluation framework needs to evaluate the following aspects of the website:

1. **Technical aspects (TA)** such as "usability and positioning." The importance of ease of use for a destination website has been pointed out by several studies. Ease of use was the primary focus of 60% of the papers published on evaluation of destination websites (Park & Gretzel, 2007). Kim and Fesenmaier (2008) too pointed out that "destination websites must be user-friendly so that information searchers can easily navigate sites with no (or a minimum level of) mental effort." Positioning part of the technical aspects has been left out as the external factors affecting the effectiveness of a website have not been considered within the scope of this study. A total of 12 attributes were identified for assessing the technical aspects of a website.
2. **Relational aspects (RA)** such as "interactivity and the use of web 2.0 tools." Interactivity has been cited as the most important feature for brand websites (Macias, 2003). It makes navigation more comfortable and helps users to process information intuitively. Nowadays, social media, too, are very crucial for relationship building. Finally, mobile marketing is becoming more and more popular. So, in addition to an engaging website, destinations should also offer a mobile version of the website (Stienmetz, Levy, & Boo, 2013) and develop specific mobile applications (Fernández-Cavia & López, 2013). A total of 16 attributes were identified under this category.
3. **Communicative aspects (CA)** such as "quantity and quality of content and language selection." Park and Gretzel (2007) also mentioned that information quality is the most prominent concept used in website evaluation studies. Additionally, destination websites must provide accurate and timely information (Li & Wang, 2010). The use of multiple languages, translations and cultural adaptation, which are essential in the tourism sector, are also included in the communicative aspects. This aspect assesses 21 attributes identified.
4. **Persuasive aspects (PA)** deals with the brand image, customer loyalty, and marketing strategy for products and services offered by the website. A destination website aims to convince and persuade potential tourists to visit it. It should present a convincing and robust brand image and should convey the distinctive features offered by the destination (Choi et al., 2007). As discussed earlier, the website's first impression is also very crucial in the process of travel-related information search on the Internet (H. Kim & Fesenmaier, 2008). Most important of all, the primary focus of a destination website is to sell the tourist riches of a destination and is considered as a virtual point of sale where the user can browse, compare, book or buy tourism products and services (Buhalis, 2000). 17 attributes were identified which fall under this category.

Thus, the literature review resulted in the identification of a total of 66 attributes for the evaluation of an ODW. Out of these, 12 were categorized as the technical aspects. 16 attributes were considered to represent the relational aspects. The communicative aspects cover 21 of the

total attributes identified. Finally, 17 attributes relate to the persuasive aspects. A summary of these findings can be found in Table 1.

Table 1. Presence of identified attributes on *incredibleindia.org*

Attribute	Presence	Attribute	Presence
<i>Technical aspects</i>		<i>Relational aspects</i>	
Navigation bar	✓	Responsive design	✓
Internal search engine	✓	Cross-browser compatibility	✓
Site map	✓	Progressive web app	✗
Consistent theme	✓	Mobile app	✓
Breadcrumb navigation	✓	Social network integration	✓
Visual effects	✓	Instant messaging	✓
Font adjustment	✗	Helpline	✓
Colour adj (font and background)	✗	Feedback	✗
Screen reader	✗	Comments box	✗
HTTPS secured	✓	FAQs	✗
Privacy statement	✓	Email newsletter	✗
Security certificate	✗	Physical helpdesks	✓
<i>Communicative aspects</i>		Advertisements	✗
Destination information	✓	Links to related websites	✓
Destination background info	✓	Personal recommendations	✗
Attraction information	✓	Personal account	✗
Events calendar	✓	<i>Persuasive aspects</i>	
Activities information	✓	Brand Name	✓
Restaurant and eating	✓	Branded URL	✓
Travel agents	✗	Branded email	✗
Weather information	✓	Logo	✓
Multi-language support	✗	Slogan	✗
Translations	✗	Transportation booking	✗
Photos and images	✓	Accommodation booking	✗
Videos	✓	Restaurant booking	✗
Virtual tours	✓	Attraction booking	✗
Maps and directions	✓	Events booking	✗
Regular updates	✗	Activities booking	✗
Visa information	✓	Travel package booking	✗
Immigration policies	✗	Travel related shopping	✗
Advisories	✗	Secure electronic payments	✗
Tourist routes	✗	Customer loyalty program	✗
Brochures and travel guides	✗	Incentive program	✗
Info for disabled	✗	Trademarks and copyrights	✓

Findings and discussion:

The aim of this study was to evaluate the effectiveness of the Indian tourism website, *www.incredibleindia.org*, in each of the four aspects of the proposed framework: technical, relational, communicative, persuasive aspects. Several attributes essential to a destination website were identified and were categorized as one of the four aspects depending on their functionality on the website. Presence of these attributes was checked on the website, and a counting method was applied. The results of the study are presented in the following sections. Table 2 summarizes the number of attributes present in various aspects of the website evaluation technique.

Table 2 Number of attributes present/absent on *incredibleindia.org*

Aspects	Present	Not present	Total
TA	8	4	12
RA	8	8	16
CA	12	9	21
PA	4	13	17
Overall	32	34	66

Technical aspects (TA):

Technical aspects of a website cover attributes like navigation and search functionality, security and privacy, and attributes that make website usage easy and seamless. We identified a total of 12 attributes, out of which 8 were present on the website, and 4 were not. The presence of attributes like top navigation bar throughout the website, breadcrumb navigation, sitemap, internal search engine, helps to traverse the website easily and creates a consistent browsing experience across the website. The website is HTTPS secured and offers a privacy policy that states how the company collects, handles and processes data of its customers and visitors. The website, however, lacks SSL security certification, which makes user data vulnerable as it travels across the computer networks (Hacker & Cissp, 2008). It also lacks major accessibility features like font size and color adjustment, background color adjustment, and screen reader. These features provide web access to persons with disabilities, and yet most of the websites, including *incredibleindia.org*, lack these features despite government regulations and legislations (Leitner, Strauss, & Stummer, 2016).

Relational aspects (RA):

A successful website does not concern itself only with the delivery of information, but it tries to establish a relationship with its users. The first step in that direction would be to make it universally available, i.e. to make the website compatible across platforms and browsers. The tourism website of India too supports responsive design and cross-browser compatibility, which means it can be accessed on most of the browsers and small screen devices and enhances website usability (Groth & Haslwanter, 2015). Progressive web apps are a recent invention in the field of

information technology. A progressive web app means native mobile app like feel in the browser itself without the need to install an app altogether. Although www.incredibleindia.org does not support progressive web app, the developers have developed a mobile app that can be downloaded from the app store of mobile phones. To build a relationship with its users, the website should focus on active communication with its users rather than passive information delivery (Goujard, 2016). To achieve the same, features like feedback, comment box, newsletter, instant messaging etc. should be employed. Our website lack most of these features. Instant chat box is available, but it never loaded during our testing phase. Social media, nowadays, can be beneficial for relationship building. Incredible India has a presence on major social media sites like Facebook, Youtube, Instagram, etc. We can see a user-generated Instagram feeds on the website. Advertisements can inform, equip and to a certain extent also intrigue or excite visitors. They can even help to generate funds by monetizing these digital investments. However, caution should be taken to ensure that the advertisements are value-adding, relevant and not distracting or offensive (Hollis, 2011). 8 of the total 16 attributes identified were present. Remaining 8 were not present on www.incredibleindia.org.

Communicative aspects (CA):

The communicative aspects of a website deal with informing its users of the product and services it offers. The flow of information does not occur only through text but other forms like photos, videos, virtual tours of attractions, maps and directions. All kinds of information about the destinations, its background information like history, culture and tradition, attractions, activities, weather, transportation and accommodation, hotels and restaurants, visa and immigration policy, etc. should be available on the website. The more knowledge, the better and informed decisions tourists can make (Bastida & Huan, 2014). The Indian tourism website does an excellent job in the information dimension. When it comes to tourism websites, the aim is to attract tourists from all parts of the world and hence, the website should be available in as many languages as possible. At least the translations should be provided (Sandrini, 2005). Our website fails to accommodate linguistic diversity. It is available only in English and Hindi, which is not sufficient for a country of thousands of languages. While travelling, there are times when tourists may not have access to the Internet and so downloadable brochures and travel guides for offline usage should be provided. Thus, out of 21 attributes identified, 12 are present, and the rest are not present on www.incredibleindia.org.

Persuasive aspects (PA):

As explained earlier, persuasive aspects of a website deal with the brand image, customer loyalty, and marketing strategy for products and services offered by the website. The website of Incredible India performs worst in the persuasive aspects. Out of 17 identified attributes, only 4 present. Expect for, a brand name, a branded URL, and a logo, all other attributes of persuasive aspects are missing. The website does not provide the facility to make any kind of bookings, be it hotel, restaurant, transportation, events, etc. Incredible India also lacks any customer loyalty or customer incentive programs which help in customer retention and persuade customers to visit the website again and again (Yi & Jeon, 2003).

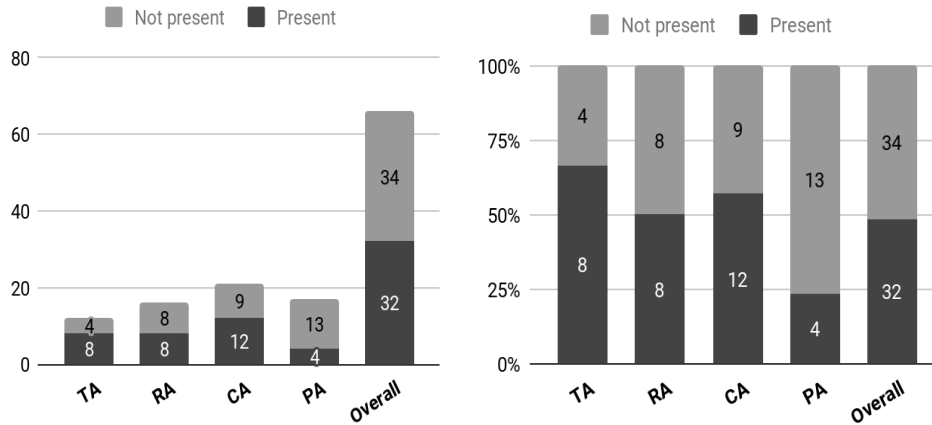


Figure 2 (a & b). Website performance of *incredibleindia.org* in various aspects

Conclusion:

Research on analyzing the characteristics of destination websites has been limited. Furthermore, most of the studies have been focused on US and European websites, while Asian destinations have been overlooked (Li & Wang, 2010). While tourism in developing nations is gaining popularity, corresponding research for the same has been limited. Furthermore, studies on Indian tourism has been very scarce. Present study is the first attempt at the analysis of the Indian tourism website.

The framework in our study uses an integrated set of website quality attributes from existing tools; hence, it is more comprehensive in terms of the number of attributes measured. The identified attributes were then categorized under one of the four aspects representing the website. The website under consideration, *www.incredibleindia.org* was analyzed for the presence of these attributes. We could find only 32 out of 66 attributes on the website, i.e. not even half of the attributes were present in the website. This is certainly not a very good website performance. The website of Incredible India still needs a lot of improvement. Even the attributes which have been marked positive needs to be upgraded to match the contemporary website standards.

India is a vast country which offers huge diversity to its visitors, diversity not only among people and culture but also in landscapes and destinations. It has something to offer to everybody from snow-capped mountains to deep seas, from deserts to rainforests and wildlife, 7000 kms of coastline and more. In recent years, India has tremendously improved its travel and tourism sector, and it reflects in the Travel & Tourism Competitiveness Report 2019 as it rose from 65th position in 2013 to 34th position in 2019 (Calderwood & Soshkin, 2019). Yet, India's share in world tourist traffic has been very low. For India to mark its position among top tourist destination, it needs an all-around development in the tourism sector, including its website, to make India accessible and tourist-friendly place.

Limitations and future research:

The website analysis of the website *www.incredibleindia.org* carried out within the scope of this study is subject to several limitations that can be addressed in future studies. First, a counting method was applied, which is not the most scientific and accurate method to evaluate the efficiency of a website. Second, only 66 attributes were taken into consideration. There could be other important attributes, as well. Other variables, such as page loading time, number of visitors per day, navigation efficiency, information usability, security, and quality of content, may

influence website efficacy. Third, external factors like search engine positioning affecting website efficiency were not taken into account. Forth, only the presence of the attributes was measured; their quality was not measured. Even if an attribute is present, it may be underperforming. Fifth, only the present condition of the website was analyzed. Tracking the evolution of the destination website can be useful to identify web features and design strategies that have proven successful over the years (Chu, Leung, Van Hui, & Cheung, 2007).

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