

SERBIAN LOCAL TOURIST ORGANIZATIONS' WEBSITES ANALYSIS

Dragana Čamilović¹

Abstract

The Internet has become an integral part of everybody's life. It is the primary source of information, and it is hard to imagine anyone planning a trip without it anymore. Given that tourism market is highly competitive, local tourist organizations in Serbia have to make an effort to present the best of their destinations to potential tourists and create a desire to visit them. The visual and information contents on a website are important, but there are many other website's features worth considering. For this reason, the author has investigated numerous features of local tourist organizations' websites of popular Serbian destinations. The aim of this paper is to propose a list of websites' attributes that should be included in the analysis of the local tourist organizations' websites, to present the results of a comparative analysis of the selected websites, and to suggest the ways for their improvement.

Key Words: *the Internet, tourism, tourist organizations, websites analysis, Serbia*

JEL classification: *Z30, Z31, L86*

Introduction

Serbia attracts more and more visitors every year. According to the Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia (2019), the total number of tourists in 2018 reached 3.431 million, 1.720 million of which were domestic, while 1.711 million were foreign tourists. Compared to the previous year, the number of domestic tourists increased by 8.3%, while the number of foreign tourists increased even more – by 14.2%. According to the total number of tourists' nights (as of August 31, 2018), the top five Serbian tourist resorts were: Belgrade (with 2,480,516 tourists' nights),

¹ Dragana Čamilović, PhD, Professor, Academy for Applied Studies Belgrade – The College of Hotel Management, Kneza Višeslava 70, Belgrade, e-mail: dragana.camilovic@vhs.edu.rs

Vrnjačka Banja (with 818,045 tourists' nights), Zlatibor (with 763,867 tourists' nights), Kopaonik (with 535,594 tourists' nights), and Sokobanja (with 498,463 tourists' nights).

Tourism organizations play an important role in promoting and supporting tourism. One of the means for them to present a destination to potential tourists is through their websites. A study has shown that about 95% of tourists gather travel information through web searches, and 93% visit destinations' websites (Luna-Nevarez & Hyman, 2012). While the National Tourism Organization of Serbia promotes and encourages travel to Serbia at a national level, regional and local tourism organizations perform the same tasks at regional and local levels, respectively.

Serbian local tourist organizations, their contact information, and website addresses are listed on the National Tourism Organization of Serbia's website (2019). Belgrade, Vrnjačka Banja, Zlatibor, and Sokobanja have their own local tourist organizations. On the other hand, Kopaonik is just one of the four destinations promoted by the Tourist Organization of Raška. The websites of these five local tourist organizations are analysed in more detail, and the results are presented later in this paper.

Research background

Many studies in the field of tourism and hospitality have been focused on analyses and evaluation of websites. They propose different methodologies and analyse different website features (i.e. attributes). These ideas were of a great help in conducting the selected websites' analysis.

Baggio (2003) assessed several features that characterise a successful website of a European tourism organization, and he grouped them into 6 main categories: (1) first impact, (2) design and graphics, (3) information content, (4) interactivity and services, (5) structure and navigation, and (6) technical management.* Fifteen evaluators were asked to compare 16 different websites (major European and some Mediterranean tourism destinations) by rating every functionality at a score ranging from 0 (min) to 3 (max).

Stankov et al. (2009) investigated 260 tourism websites in Serbia according to several features grouped into five categories: website profile (when was

* The categories are cited as in the original paper – Author's Note.

the website created, website type: static/dynamic), website credibility (owner, data sources, update info), presentation of the website content (navigation, foreign language accessibility, basic colour, contrast), type of content (pictures, sound, multimedia), and visibility and search engine rank (Google, Yahoo, Pogodak, and Krstarica). The selected tourism websites included travel agencies, accommodation facilities, transport companies, and travel and tourism organizations and portals (op. cit.).

Fernández-Cavia et al. (2014) state that there are four main aspects of a website that need to be in focus: technical aspects (such as usability and positioning), communicative aspects (such as the amount and quality of content or language selection), relational aspects (such as interactivity or use of 2.0 tools), and persuasive aspects (such as brand image and options for marketing the products and services provided by the website).

Jovanović and Jovanović Tončev (2015) analysed the structure of the websites of Vrnjačka Banja and Sokobanja according to 9 categories: website domain (website domain adequacy), website type according to its functioning (static or dynamic), doorway page, content adequacy by the website type, website content presentation quality (navigation, foreign language availability, website colours, colour contrast), search engine visibility (Google, Yahoo, Metasearch.rs, and Krstarica), the Internet advertising techniques (links to other websites, presence of banners, number of banners, banner types: static or dynamic), public relations techniques (news section, chat box, forums, surveys, membership option), and website's distributive elements (online booking option).

Li et al. (2015) evaluated 19 World Heritage Sites (WHS) based on 33 attributes representing 5 dimensions: communication (8 attributes: online customer service, readability, contact information, links to social media, multiple language versions, electronic newsletter, feedback form, and surveys or polls), site attractiveness (2 attributes: visual appearance and webpage design), marketing effectiveness (4 attributes: tourism amenities/services, directions or maps, local weather, and commercial companies links), technical setup (5 attributes: logic structure, user-friendly interface, link workability, site map, and privacy policy), and world heritage specifics (14 attributes: world heritage logo, UNESCO logo, WHS program information, UNESCO website link, world heritage FAQ, statement of outdoor ethics, reference to sustainability practices, site recreation information, ticket pricing information, online ticket purchase option, availability of WHS brochures, visual tour, events calendar, and

photo gallery). In their study, the attributes were scored by using three types of scales (presence/absence; 2-point; and 3-point).

Novabosa et al. (2015) integrated the web quality attributes used in other studies and grouped them into 4 quality factors: information completeness (information quality, textual information, social media integration, travel aids), credibility (security, privacy, trust, reliability), usability (ease of use, responsiveness, interactivity, personalization, involvement, navigation, information architecture, accessibility), and persuasiveness (visual appearance, fulfilment, inspiration, reciprocity, advertising, auditory features, pictures and visuals).

Prathapan et al. (2018) used AIDA (Attention, Interest, Desire, Action) model in order to evaluate and compare the performance of the tourism website of the government of Kerala with its competitors' websites. According to them, the first stage of the AIDA model is about creating brand awareness. It is followed by creating interest (in the second stage), while in the third stage, customers need to be convinced that the product/service will satisfy their needs. This should incite them to action – the actual purchase (in the fourth stage). The authors proposed suitable KPIs (Key Performance Indicators) for measuring each stage of the AIDA model:

- Attention stage: total number of visitors and number of unique visitors,
- Interest stage: average duration of visit and bounce rate,
- Desire stage: most visited pages,
- Action stage: click-through rate.

Vaško and Vaško (2018) evaluated 26 websites of tourism organizations and boards in Bosnia and Herzegovina by analysing a large number of different attributes grouped according to contact data (address, email, telephone, fax, working hours, useful links, important phone numbers), location data (location of region/city, geographic information, map, how to get to the location), general website information (history data, accommodation, gastronomic offer, shopping opportunities, sightseeing tours, touristic agencies, cultural and historical sites, cultural manifestations, entertainment, sport activities), content search options (website map, website search, events calendar), multilingualism (1, 2, 3 languages, or more than 3 languages), multimedia content (photographs, videos, coat of arms/logo, brochures), Web 2.0 technologies (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, RSS, YouTube, other 2.0 services), mobile device accessibility (functional on mobile devices, adjusted for mobile devices),

mobile applications (iOS, Android, Windows mobile), and website speed (five time-ranges). They calculated the overall ranks of the analysed websites by summing the number of points assigned to each of these attributes.

Ćamilović (2019) compared the websites of several Belgrade museums according to their overall SEO (search engine optimization) scores, general information availability (address, email, phone, fax, google map, opening hours, house rules), mobile-friendliness, additional information and online purchase availability (ticket prices, guided tours schedule, event calendar, online contact/reservation form, ticket purchase, online store), search button/box and sitemap functionalities, and social media buttons availability (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, Pinterest).

Comparative analysis of the selected tourist organizations' websites

As mentioned earlier, five websites of local tourist organizations were selected for the purpose of this study. The list of the tourist organizations (TOs) that are covered by the study and their official websites are presented in Table 1. The study was conducted in January 2020.

Table 1: *Analysed sample of TOs and their websites*

Tourist organization (TO)	Official website
TO of Belgrade	http://www.tob.rs
TO of Vrnjačka Banja	http://www.vrnjackabanja.co.rs
TO of Zlatibor	http://www.zlatibor.org.rs
TO of Raška	https://raskaturizam.rs
TO of Sokobanja	http://www.tosokobanja.rs

Source: *Author*

This study is mostly based on the website features adapted from the existing studies (Baggio, 2003; Stankov et al., 2009; Fernández-Cavia et al., 2014; Jovanović & Jovanović Tončev, 2015; Li et al., 2015; Novabosa et al., 2015; Prathapan et al., 2018; Vaško & Vaško, 2018; Ćamilović, 2019). The author has suggested a list of different website features that need to be analysed, and grouped them into 7 main categories: search engine optimization, website functionality, interactivity, visual appearance, tourist organizations' website specifics, visitor information, and social media links. This is illustrated in Table 2.

Table 2: *Analysis of the local tourist organizations' websites*

Category	Website feature
1. Search engine optimization	a) SEO overall score
2. Website functionality	a) main navigation menu availability b) mobile friendly website c) search box/button d) multiple language versions
3. Interactivity	a) contact information b) contact us form c) FAQ d) newsletter sign-up
4. Visual appearance	a) readability b) tourist organization logo c) photographs d) videos e) virtual tour
5. TO's website specifics	e) accommodation f) attractions, historical & cultural sites g) sightseeing tours& excursions h) restaurants, cafés & bars i) shopping j) sport k) major events
6. Visitor information	a) how to get to the destination b) tourist info centres c) local weather d) time zone & currency
7. Social media links	a) Facebook b) Twitter c) YouTube d) Instagram

Source: *Author*

There are two ways in which travel planners seek the online information about a destination (Luna-Nevarez & Hyman, 2012): (1) they use the destination's name or other destination-related keywords within a search engine, or (2) they access the destination's website directly by typing its address (i.e. URL – uniform resource locator). The first scenario is more likely to happen. This means that not only is it important for a tourist organization to have a website, but it is also very important that they make it friendly to search engines. Search engine optimization improves a website's overall searchability and visibility, and it also ensures better user experience and builds trust and credibility (Hollingsworth, 2018). Given

the importance of SEO, the author has analysed the selected websites by using a free online tool called SEO Web Page Analyzer. This tool evaluates the quality of a website from an accessibility, usability, and search engine point of view, and calculates its overall score (Ćamilović, 2019). Table 3 presents the scores of the selected tourist organizations' websites.

Table 3: *The overall SEO scores*

TO's website URL	Overall score
http://www.tob.rs/sr	53
http://www.vrnjackabanja.co.rs/srpski/	49
http://www.zlatibor.org.rs/sr/	45
https://raskaturizam.rs	57
http://www.tosokobanja.rs/sr	70

Source: *Author*

The results show that the analysed websites have a wide range of scores between 45 and 70. The TO of Sokobanja performed a very good SEO and its score is 70. The websites of the TO of Belgrade and TO of Raška have overall scores between 50 and 60, which is satisfying. They are followed by the TO of Vrnjačka Banja and TO of Zlatibor, whose scores are below 50 and there is room for their improvement. Fortunately, for each URL provided, the SEO Web Page Analyzer offers suggestions on helping the website reach its full potential, which would result in a better score (Ćamilović, 2019).

Website functionality is relevant for achieving a positive user experience. The author investigated several important functionality features of the websites listed in Table 3, and the results are shown in Table 4. One of the most important parts of a website is a main header navigation, and this was the first functionality feature examined. All the analysed websites have the main navigation menu for all pages of the website, which sits along the top of the page. The author also tested if the websites were mobile-friendly, by using Mobile-Friendly Test Tool and found out that they were. Besides the main menu, a website should include the search box/button, which helps visitors search the entire website for what they are looking for. The TO of Belgrade, TO of Zlatibor, and TO of Raška do not have this feature available on their websites. The search option on the TO of Sokobanja's website does not work well: the website does not show any search results and the error message is displayed instead. To make the website useful for foreign tourists, it should have multiple language versions. Unfortunately, the TO of Sokobanja does not have this option. All the other analysed

websites have an English version, in addition to Serbian one. However, the English version is not easily accessible on the TO of Belgrade’s website: there is no English version button visibly displayed. Instead, there is an option in a submenu to switch to English version, but for a non-Serbian speaker it is difficult to instantly find it. The TO of Zlatibor made an extra effort to attract foreign audience by also having the versions in Russian and German, besides English and Serbian.

Table 4: *Websites’ functionality analysis*

Tourist organization (TO)	Website functionality			
	Main menu	Mobile friendly	Search box/ button	Multiple language versions
TO of Belgrade	√	√	×	√
TO of Vrnjačka Banja	√	√	√	√
TO of Zlatibor	√	√	×	√
TO of Raška	√	√	×	√
TO of Sokobanja	√	√	√*	×

Source: *Author*

Interactivity is very important for a tourism website. It defines how the visitor engages with the organization. The simplest way to do this is to provide contact information, but this can be considered a low-level interactivity. The other option is to have a *contact us* form on the website. Interactivity can also include having a dedicated page for FAQ (frequently asked questions) or a newsletter sign-up option, which can be an effective way to stay in contact with potential tourists while providing additional useful information (Campaign Monitor, 2019). Furthermore, a newsletter sign-up form may require filling in some additional data (for example gender, date of birth, hometown, or some preferences), which can be put in use by deploying different data analysis applications, as described by Čamilović (2018a).

* Search option available on the website, but it does not return search results and reports an error.

Applying some of the more advanced interaction features, such as chat box, could be a challenge due to the large number of website visitors. However, tourists should be given an opportunity to communicate through different Web 2.0 tools (the link to social media will be analysed later in this section). Facebook, for example, offers the option to implement Messenger chatbot that can provide the answers to frequently asked questions. Chatbot is an artificial intelligence application that allows people to interact with a bot in a natural language and it is not strictly limited to Facebook (Ćamilović, 2018b). Moreover, Messenger chatbot can be added to a website homepage, combining a live website chat with the features of Messenger chatbot (Chatfuel, 2019). Table 5 presents the results of the selected websites' interactivity analysis.

Table 5: *Websites' interactivity analysis*

Tourist organization (TO)	Interactivity			
	Contact information	Contact us form	FAQ	Newsletter sign-up
TO of Belgrade	√	×	×	√*
TO of Vrnjačka Banja	√	×	×	×
TO of Zlatibor	√	×	×	×
TO of Raška	√	√	×	×
TO of Sokobanja	√	√	×	×

Source: *Author*

The findings show that all the analysed websites provide contact information. The websites of the TO of Raška and TO of Sokobanja have a *contact us* form, as well. None of the websites have a FAQ page. Only the TO of Belgrade's website contains a newsletter sign-up option, but it does not seem to work. The author filled in the subscription form on January 9th, 2020, and did not get a confirmation email, nor a newsletter of any kind. It is unfortunate that the tourist organizations do not recognize the necessity of having a functional newsletter sign-up form, because a large number of tourists browse many potential destinations before deciding to take a trip. Newsletter can be a powerful way to inspire and persuade them to make the preferable choice.

* Option available, but it does not work properly.

The visual appearance of a website is probably its most important characteristic, and it greatly influences the impression that a potential tourist forms about the destination. When choosing the colour combinations for a website, they should be tested for contrast. This ensures a good website readability. Selecting the appropriate fonts also influences it. The presence of an organization’s logo can help distinguish the website from the others; it provides trust and credibility, and also creates a good first impression. Most importantly, potential tourists want to visualize their visit to the place in order to be motivated to make a booking. Virtual tours can be of great help for this, as well as beautiful pictures and videos of the place. It is worth investing in professional photography and video imaging, because they can inspire people to choose the presented destination instead of competing ones. Table 6 illustrates the results of the websites’ visual appearance analysis.

Table 6: *Websites’ visual appearance analysis*

Tourist organization (TO)	Visual appearance				
	Readability	TO Logo	Photographs	Videos	Virtual tour
TO of Belgrade	×	×	√	√	×
TO of Vrnjačka Banja	×	√	√	√	√
TO of Zlatibor	√	√	√	×	√
TO of Raška	×	√	√	√	×
TO of Sokobanja	√	√	√	×	×

Source: *Author*

The study has revealed that, unfortunately, the text on the analysed webpages is often not very readable. The author checked fonts and background colours (of the desktop versions of the websites) for sufficient colour contrast by using Colorzilla add-on for Firefox and Contrast Checker. The TO of Belgrade’s website uses a light grey background image, and it is not in good contrast to the dark grey text colour. The TO of Vrnjačka Banja and TO of Raška use a light grey font colour on white and alabaster background colours, respectively, which makes the text on these two websites difficult to read. This could be a problem, and the use of darker fonts colour could help both of these websites improve their text readability. On the TO of Sokobanja’s website, only a small portion of the text (dates of the posts) is light grey and the rest of the text has a good

colour contrast, distinguishing it from the background colour quite nicely. That is also the case with the TO of Zlatibor’s website.

Most of the websites have a tourist organization logo on their homepage. The TO of Belgrade decided to create a different visual identity by displaying #GoBELGRADE logo instead. All the websites have photographs, while three of them have videos as well. The TO of Vrnjačka Banja and TO of Zlatibor offer 360-degree virtual tours, which is an ideal way to let a potential tourist explore the chosen site. Unlike photographs or videos, virtual tours are interactive and give the most realistic presentation of the location.

The information that a potential tourist expects to find on a website is what the place has to offer. It starts with the information about attractions worth visiting, including the natural beauty spots, historical, and cultural sites. Most tourists want to plan their trip: to choose where to stay, what sightseeing tours to take, which events are worth visiting, where to eat or go shopping. Some are interested in sport activities. Table 7 shows whether a tourist can find such information on the analysed websites or not.

Table 7: *TO’s website specifics*

Tourist organization (TO)	TO’s website specifics						
	Accommodation	Attractions, historical & cultural	Sightseeing tours & excursions	Restaurants, cafés & bars	Shopping	Sport	Major events
TO of Belgrade	√	√	√	×	√	√	√
TO of Vrnjačka Banja	√	√	×	√	×	√	√
TO of Zlatibor	√	√	√	√	×	√	√
TO of Raška	√	√	×	√	×	√	√
TO of Sokobanja	√	√	×	×	×	√	√

Source: *Author*

All the analysed websites offer the information about accommodation and attractions, historical, and cultural sites. However, only two give the information about sightseeing tours and excursions. The TO of Zlatibor offers a variety of restaurant choices, and there are a number of restaurants listed on the TO of Vrnjačka Banja’s and TO of Raška’s websites, as well.

This is not the case with the TO of Belgrade and TO of Sokobanja, which offer no restaurant recommendations. This is quite a shame, especially for Belgrade, considering its excellent gastronomic offer. However, on the TO of Belgrade’s website, there is a culinary guide that promotes several most famous national dishes. The website also explains the city’s best shopping areas. All the websites provide the information about sport activities, and major events. However, a visitor cannot find the dates of such events on the website of the TO of Vrnjačka Banja (only short descriptions about some cultural events are available).

Table 8 shows visitor information availability. Most of the websites provide the information about how to get to the destination. Information about tourist info centres is available on all the websites. Only the TO of Belgrade has a weather widget, as well as time zone and currency information.

Table 8: *Visitor information*

Tourist organization (TO)	Visitor information			
	How to get to the destination	Tourist info centres	Local weather	Time zone & currency
TO of Belgrade	√	√	√	√
TO of Vrnjačka Banja	√*	√	×	×
TO of Zlatibor	×	√	×	×
TO of Raška	√	√	×	×
TO of Sokobanja	√	√	×	×

Source: *Author*

Potential tourists extensively use social networks when planning a trip. Any post on a social network, whether it is a photograph, video or just a text post, can inspire a potential tourist to visit the destination or at least to browse for more information about it (Ćamilović, 2018b). That is why it is very important for a local tourist organization to properly manage its social media profiles and to also link them to its website.

*Option available on a website, but it does not work well and reports an error.

There are several reasons why adding social media links on homepage is beneficial to a tourist organization. Since a website conversion rate is low, having social media links is a great way to keep in touch with potential tourists and convert them into future visitors (Kang, 2019). Kang (2019) emphasizes that in today’s business environment, building trust and demonstrating authenticity is crucial. A good way to demonstrate authenticity is through social media posts, and improving of the SEO comes as a bonus (op. cit.). Table 9 indicates social media links availability on the homepage.

Table 9: *Social media links availability on the homepage*

Tourist organization (TO)	Social media links			
	Facebook	Twitter	YouTube	Instagram
TO of Belgrade	√	√	√	√
TO of Vrnjačka Banja	√	×	×	×
TO of Zlatibor	√	×	×	√
TO of Raška	√	×	√	√
TO of Sokobanja	×	×	×	×

Source: *Author*

The best practice is to add social media links to the bottom of a homepage, and more than half of the analysed websites have indeed applied this practice. The author has discovered that all the analysed tourist organizations have their Facebook pages. However, the TO of Sokobanja neglected to post the link to it on their homepage (there is no link, nor a social media button). There is another problem: the TO of Sokobanja linked the wrong URL to their Facebook profile (instead of the link to <http://www.tosokobanja.rs>, their Facebook profile was linked to a non-existing URL: <http://www.otks.org.rs>).

Conclusion

The number of the Internet users is consistently growing. The statistic shows that 4.479 billion people were active Internet users as of October 2019 (Statista, 2019). This means that 58% of the global population use the Internet (op. cit.). It is almost unimaginable to collect the information about potential destinations without it. Given that local tourist organizations play

an important role in promoting their destinations, their websites' quality is of great importance.

This paper provides a framework for analysis of local tourist organizations' websites, based on many different criteria. The framework has been used to compare five selected websites, and the results of this comparative analysis are very interesting. It turns out that there are some issues worth addressing. The study shows that:

- SEO optimization of some analysed websites could be improved;
- It is advisable for the websites to have a functional search box/button (unfortunately, the analysis showed that three out of five websites did not have one, and that one website had the search option available, but it did not return the search results and reported an error);
- Additional efforts should be devoted to making the websites available in several world languages;
- The websites' interactivity could be greatly enhanced (for a start, a newsletter sign-up form could be provided);
- On some of the websites, the text is difficult to read, and changing of the font colour should be considered;
- Not all local tourist organizations use social media enough. This is unfortunate, because the marketing potential of social networks is significant, and many tourists use social networks to find additional information about destinations, as well as to interact with tourist organizations.

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