Marketing of   Resorts & Homestays to Ecotourists through Websites in Coastal Karnataka: A Content Analysis

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Abstract

The development of IT and a remarkable growth in internet based services has resulted in an increasing number of tourists using travel based websites for their travel decisions. Internet with multimedia features enables destination marketers to target prospective tourists. Hospitality and tourism research studies have established the fact marketing characteristics and design of websites influence the traffic and level of business. For successful e-marketing, web usability is one of the important factors and developing an effective content and a well designed technology based website is essential.

This article examines the websites of tourism operators to know how they utilize internet technology to market their businesses. The study focuses on the website evaluation of Coastal Karnataka resorts and homestays. Subjects investigated are the websites of resorts and hotels that are nature based or offer nature based activities to their guests in coastal Karnataka. The study used qualitative research approach conducting content analysis of the websites using Internet Site Evaluation Form to measure their usability and marketing effectiveness.

The study shows that the resort and home stays in Coastal Karnataka are not effectively using their websites and internet technology to market themselves. In India there has been a revolutionary growth in smart phone sales resulting in a greater usage of internet. This growth would be benefiting tourism marketers and operators who could use internet with its multimedia features to reach out to potential travellers.

Key words- Internet marketing, content analysis, website design and marketing characteristics.

INTRODUCTION

The development of IT and a remarkable growth in internet based services has resulted in an increasing number of tourists using travel based websites for their travel decisions. These websites effectively communicate to prospective tourists of the various vacation destination packages they are offering often with different tariff and payment options. The growth in internet technology has resulted in the tourism industry increasing its

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geographical reach and catering to tourists from all over the world. Travel and tourism boards, travel agencies, resorts and accommodation providers develop their websites with attractive site design, content and technology to attract prospective tourists. Internet is fast becoming an important marketing tool for marketing tourism. Over one billion people in the world have access to the internet and travel websites have become increasingly more appealing to tourists.

Internet acts as a source for information as well as for marketing and promoting any place or destination. Tourism websites are conveying valuable information to potential tourists and enabling their decision for booking a destination for their vacation (Fesenmaier & Jeng, 2000; Pan, 2003). Any tourist destination that needs to create a right image and target prospective tourists has to invest in technology and develop good websites as for tourists the website is the primary information gathering source for their travel plans. Developing a well designed and technology enabled website facilitates even small ecotourism operators to market their operations across different countries targeting prospective tourists. This was not possible in the past. (Dorsey, et. al 2004). A well designed and attractive tourism website with accurate and effective content is important as these websites can have an impact on tourists' choices.

ISSUES FOR RESEARCH AND INVESTIGATION

Tourism industry is leading in terms of volume of online transaction (Werthner and Ricci 2004). For private and public tourism organizations internet has become the most important marketing communication channel for marketing and promoting their services.(Wang and Fessennmaier 2006). According to Carson (2005) internet has five essential functions that includes communicating, promoting, distribution of products and services and management and research. There are a few studies that have focused on evaluating tourism websites .For any travel website to attract prospective tourists it has to be interactive and its usability is crucial for its success. Wan (2002) in his study of websites of Taiwan's tour operators and international tourists hotel concluded that these organizations are not utilizing their websites as a tool of marketing but as an advertising medium.

According to Baloglu and Peklan (2006) websites of luxury hotels in Turkey were underutilizing the potentialities of internet as a marketing tool for marketing to the prospective tourists. Choi, Lehto and Morrison (2007) conducted qualitative and quantitative analysis of Macau tourist websites. Mader (1999) studied ecotourism project websites in Latin America and concluded that these websites did not educate travellers on ecotourism. Dorsey et.al (2004) conducted website analysis of seven ecotourism organizations that offered tours to ecotourism destinations and concluded that most of the websites link ecotourism to sustainable tourism.

Burton and Wilson (2001) conducted evaluation of ecotourism websites to study whether they fulfilled their purpose of educating people about ecotourism. The results indicated that they educated people on ecotourism but with repetitive content.

Sigala (2001) analyzed the Greek hotel websites on how successful they were in their e- marketing strategies by using internet as an effective marketing tool. According to Perdue (2001) website design and marketing site characteristics are effectual in the delivery of messages, developing a brand image and the quality of products and services as demonstrated by the research studies in the field of tourism and hospitality

Beckendorff and Black (2001) in their study on the role played by internet for Australia's Regional Tourism Authorities (RTA) concluded that internet is indeed a very effective destination marketing tool for that organization.

According to Parets (2002) even small eco resort and lodge operators having independent properties can develop their own websites to reach out to prospective tourists . The overall quality of a website will influence the traffic and level of business

Liebmann (2000) argued that the quality of a website is very critical in attracting visitors as well as increasing the level of business. An efficient management of the website and its design and content should be given equal consideration for the overall successful e-marketing.

Benckendorff & Black, (2000) considered interactivity, navigation, and functionality as the components of website design characteristics that may not be mutually exclusive in the analysis of websites

Miller & Gail (2006) used content analysis in the evaluation the websites

of ecolodges in Costa Rica to establish whether they are utilizing it as a communication and marketing tool to promote ecotourism and promote themselves as ecolodges.The study was based on 'Internet site evaluation form' containing the website design and marketing site characteristics as developed by Baloglu and Pekcan (2006). In addition to these characteristics, the authors added four additional characteristics such as availability of information on ecotourism and ecotourism mission of the resort/homestay, description of local community involvement of the resort /homestay and adding links to other ecotourism websites. The website analysis results indicated that Costa Rican ecolodges are not utilizing the internet completely and is underperforming while marketing the products and services through their websites. Website design characteristics that included the components such as interactivity, functionality and navigation as well as marketing characteristics indicated lack of consistency.

Lai, P.H., & Shafer, S. (2005) in their study of ecolodge operators' marketing on the internet, conducted content analysis for examining online marketing information of these websites that were listed with "The International Ecotourism Society" website.The result indicated that they offered diverse ecotourism based products to match the varied interests of the ecotourists but the online marketing communication indicated that most of them only partially aligned with ecotourism principles.

Several similar studies have been conducted worldwide in Australia, Greece, and Taiwan etc but there is limited studies on website evaluation of resorts and homestays in India.

OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

The objective of the study was to measure the usefulness of the websites promoting Coastal Karnataka as a place for ecotourism and adventure based destination. Websites of resorts, homestays and jungle lodges operating in Coastal Karnataka were analyzed through the Internet Site Evaluation Form. The study was conducted to establish how these operators are are using internet marketing through their websites to promote and market to the prospective tourists.

Coastal Karnataka with Uttara Kannada, Udupi and Dakshina Kannada districts have several resorts and homestays .There are five government

owned and managed resorts under the Jungle Lodges and Resorts (JLR) banner; one at Ganeshgudi (Old Magazine House) and Kali River Lodge (Dandeli), Devbagh Beach Resort, Karwar, Om Beach Resort ,Gokarna and Phalguni Resort, Pilikula. Kulgi Nature Camp, Kulgi and Anejari Nature Camp in Mookambika Wildlife Sancturay are two nature camps with tent accommodation that are managed by the Karnataka Forest Department .The remaining facilities are private small homestays and other private resorts.

METHODOLOGY

Google search engine tool was used to get a list of websites promoting and marketing eco and adventure tourism in Coastal Karnataka. The key words used were 'Tourism in Coastal Karnataka' 'Ecotourism in Dandeli', 'Resorts and Homestays in Uttara Kannada, Udupi and Dakshina Kannada. A total of 72 websites were chosen for analysis which is the total number of websites that are marketing Coastal Karnataka tourism.

Karnataka has over 300 km of coastal stretch. Coastal Karnataka, which is the focus of the present study comprises of three districts (1) Dakshina Kannada (South Canara), (2) Udupi and (3) Uttara Kananda (North Canara).

Uttara Kannada District is abundant with natural resources and a long coastal line of about 140 kms. One of the major places in Uttara Kannada districts which has the potential to offer ecotourism is the *Kali Tiger Reserve* also known as *Dandeli-Anshi Tiger Reserve* and located in biologically sensitive Western Ghats. It has got the FKCCI-Karnataka Tourism Award -2016 in the Category – "The Best in Eco-Tourism Hotspot". It is a **habitat of the rare Black Panther** and more than 400 species of birds. It offers individualized trekking experiences with the best conservation practices and with the largest network of Ecotrails such as the *Kulgi Nature Camp, Castle Rock adventure* and *Anshi Nature Camp* which have the base camps in Dandeli and *Kali Wilderness Camp that* offers jungle safari and white water rafting on River Kali.

The following places near *Dandeli that* have great potential for ecotourism are ; *Kavala Caves* that have a gigantic 'Shivling',*Syntheri Rock* which is a 300-feet tall monolithic granite ,*Sykes Point* with a tower-like

witnessing platform, *Siroli Peak* offering a view of the rain forest , Molangi and the *Nagajhari Valley* with densely forested mountains and streams and *Old Magazine Resort at Ganesh Gudi* surrounded by thick forest for bird watching

Karwar with some finest beaches offers beach tourism with other tourist places such as **Koorma Gada** a tortoise shaped island , **Kadra Dam** across Kali River with its powerhouse, **Tilmati Beach** with black sand , **Devbagh island** for diving , snorkelling facilities and aqua sports and *Devbagh Beach Resort managed* under Jungle Lodges & Resorts with log huts offers adventure and ecotourism

Gokarna a sea-side destination that has several nature based resorts in Om Beach, Kudle Beach, Half Moon Beach and the Paradise Beach . *Attiveri Bird Sanctuary* in Mundgod spread over 560 acres records over 130 species of birds. Places for visit in *Ankola* are *Belikeri Beach, Kundadri, Vibhuthi Falls and Basakal Gudda.*

Nethrani Island or Pigeon Island for bird watching, **Apsarakonda** for natural beauty with waterfalls, hills and caves. **Yana with its** unique black crystalline limestone rocks for rock climbing and several waterfalls in nearby areas such as **Unchalli or** *Lushington Falls* , **Shivaganga Falls ,Bennehole and Kumbri Falls and Magod Falls .**

Udupi District

The following places offer nature based ecotourism in Udupi district

Turtle Bay Resort at Trasi Maravanthe offers snorkelling and scuba diving for the tourists. It is an eco-beach resort known for marine conservation and is inhabited by the sea turtles during its nesting season.

Mookambika Wildlife Sanctuary near Kollur offers nature camping, butterfly trails and trekking to Arshinagundi Falls

Malpe Beach the first 24/7 wi-fi enabled beach in the country offers surfing and parasailing. *St Mary's Islands* has unique geological formation of columnar basaltic lava and

Ottinene Beach in Byndoor is popular for its spectacular sunset.

Kodachadri is a mountain peak with dense forests in the Western Ghats. *Kudlu Theertha ,Arbi Falls, Belkal Theertha ,Mala Joyisaragundi ,Kosalli ,Barkana ,Vibhuti,,Arasinagundi* are the waterfalls *and Babbu*

Kudru island ,Kannda Kudru, Uppina Kudru, Heri Kudru, ,Kemmangundi, Kundadri , Agumbe Sunset Point, Kudremukh are all tourists spots for trekking and *Malyadi Bird Sanctuary* for bird watching. *Paradise Lagoon & House Boat , Hanging Bridge Kemmannu, Pithrody River, Sita River, Sowparnika River, Udyavara River, Ramasamudra Lake* offer backwater tourism

Dakshina Kannada District

Dakshina Kannada with Western Ghats on the east and bordered by Arabian Sea is abundant with pristine beaches, picturesque mountain ranges, temple towns and a rich culture.

The Pilikula Nisargadhama, *Moodushedde* spread over 300 acres is **an eco-educational and tourism park promoted by the District Administration** that offers a variety of attractions such as a lake with boating facilities, a wild life safari, a mini aquarium, science centre, botanical and horticultural gardens, musical fountains, **a biological park, a golf course, an amusement park, an arboretum, a heritage village and an artisan village** .

*Ullal, Surathkal,***Tannirbavi , Someshwara, Panambur** offer beach tourism

Kumara Parvatha or Kumara Hills attracts trekkers and adventure lovers. *Soans Farm* near *Moodabidr*i known for a variety of spices and medicinal plants, attracts foreign tourists who take a tour of the Farm when cruise ships dock at the Mangalore port

Sammilan Shetty's Butterfly Park in Belvai near Moodabidri with more than 100 species of butterflies is developed for conserving the butterfly fauna of Western Ghats

Data Collection

The study participants were obtained from the search engine google.com & travel website TripAdvisor .com. Google search engine tool was used to get a list of websites promoting and marketing eco and adventure tourism in Coastal Karnataka. The key words used were 'Tourism in Coastal Karnataka ' 'Ecotourism in Dandeli', 'Resorts and Homestays in Dandeli, Karwar, Udupi district,Dakshina Kannada. Key words were also used such as resorts and homestays in different prominent places of the

three coastal districts to know the different accommodation establishments in the study area. Similarly travel website TripAdvisor was used to get the list of resorts and homestays in the study region based on the reviews posted by the tourists.

Total number of websites selected for the study was 72. This study analysed the website design and marketing characteristics of the websites developed by Baloglu and Pekcan (2006). Interactivity, navigation, and functionality are the website design characteristics. Marketing characteristics included components such as whether the websites have photographs of the resorts/ homestays and rooms, provide information on the products and activities offered, information on the price/ tariff and links to tourism based information for the tourists. The websites were accessed and analyzed based on the Internet site evaluation form to examine whether they were using Internet as a marketing tool.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

This study utilized content analysis to analyze the websites of resorts and homestays in Coastal Karnataka in terms of site design characteristics (interactivity, navigation, and functionality) and marketing practices on Internet

Table 1 Interactivity Characteristic of the Websites of the Resorts & Homestays in the Study Region

Characteristic	Frequency		Percentage
	Yes	No	Yes
Phone Number Listed	72	0	100
Address Listed	70	2	97.22
E-mail Hyperlink	38	34	52.78
Online Information Request Form	48	24	66.67
E-mail Listed	64	8	88.89
Calendar (for special programs)	3	69	4.17

contd.

Updated Exchange Rate	2	70	2.78
Online Survey	3	69	4.17
Online Comment Form	18	54	25
Online Guest Book	18	54	25

Interactivity

The websites overall performed well in interactivity. Only 4.17 percentage of the sites provided online surveys and just 2.78 percentage provided exchange rate information. An online comment form was provided by 25percentage of the websites and calendar of events were existent with only 4.7percentage of the sites. An online information request form was available with 66.67percentage of the websites and an online guestbook were available for 25percentage of the sites. The websites performed well in terms of phone number and address listed on all the websites (100percentage) and 97.22percentage of the websites respectively.

Email addresses were prominent on 88.89percentage of the websites, with 52.78percentage of them offering email hyperlinks.

Table 2 Navigation Links of the Websites of the Resorts & Homestays in the Study Region

Characteristic	Frequency		Percentage
	Yes	No	Yes
Links to other Sites	16	56	22.22
Links to other Revenue Centers(restaurant, bar, tours, etc.)	23	49	31.94
Consistent Navigation	70	2	97.22
Ease of Navigation	66	6	91.67
Links to ecotourism information sites	3	69	4.17
Index Page	71	1	98.61
Search Capabilities within site	6	66	8.33

Navigation

Navigation which is one of the components of website design had seven characteristics. These were analyzed for measuring the navigation performance of the websites.

97.22percentage of websites exhibited consistent navigation (97.22percentage) with ease of navigation exhibited by 91.67percentage and 98.61percentage websites showed an index page.

However only 31.94percentage of the websites offered links to different sources of revenue for the establishments such as links to tourists tours packages, restaurants and bars and only 8.33percentage of the sites offered search capabilities within their site.

Only 4.17percentage offered Internet links to information about ecotourism and 22.22 percentage of the sites offered Internet links to other tourist informational websites. Overall the websites performed poorly in these two characteristics as only a few offered the links to ecotourism and other tourists information.

Table 3 Site Functionality of the Websites of the Resorts & Homestays in the Study Region

Characteristics	Frequency		Percentage
	Yes	No	Yes
Corporate Identity	64	8	88.89
Background Color	69	3	95.83
Background Image	42	30	58.33
Video	12	60	16.67
Audio	2	70	2.78
Date Last Updated	33	39	45.83
Banner Advertisement	9	63	12.5
Download Facilities	9	63	12.5
Ease of Download	9	63	12.5
What's New?	8	64	11.11
Variety of Information	68	4	94.44
Detailed Information	66	6	91.67

Multilingual Capabilities	8	64	11.11
Flash Animation / banner slideshow	48	24	66.67
Do you have to scroll down on first page?	52	20	72.22
Ease of Physical Access to WebSite	71	1	98.61

Functionality

In terms of functionality of the websites only some of the characteristics were exhibited by majority of the websites. Only 58.33percentage of the websites had a background image and only 16.67percentage websites offered video and just 2.78 percentage websites had audio facilities in their sites. 45.83 percentage "last updated" and banner advertising only 12.5percentage while download capabilities and ease of downloads were exhibited by 12.5percentage of the websites .

Very few websites (11.11percentage) displayed "what's new" feature on their homepages and multi- lingual capabilities were there in 11.11percentage of the websites.

Long home pages force visitors to the websites to scroll down and might hinder their further browsing of the websites and hence this feature is not desired for a website. It was observed that 72.22percentage of the websites were with long home pages.

Characteristics such as physical access to each site was provided by a majority of the websites (98.61percentage) and (88.89percentage) of the websites displayed a corporate logo or identity and(95.83percentage) had background colour. Majority of the websites exhibited detailed information and content (91.67percentage) and offered a variety of information (94.44percentage) and most of the websites offered flash animation (66.67percentage)

Table 4 Marketing Characteristics of the Websites of the Resorts & Homestays in the Study Region

Characteristics	Frequency		Total
	Yes	No	Yes
Hotel Picture	69	3	95.83
Room Picture	68	4	94.44
Quality of Pictures	69	3	95.83
Quality of Text	70	2	97.22
Any Promotion Mentioned	26	46	36.11
Description of Product and Services	63	9	87.5
Ecotourism mission	11	61	15.28
How to get to the Resort/Homestay	54	18	75
Amenities	69	3	95.83
Location Map of the Hotel	52	20	72.22
Online Payment	21	51	29.17
Online Reservation	36	36	50
Reservation by E-mail	36	36	50
Links to Tourist Information	34	38	47.22
Availability of Price Information	53	19	73.61
Community involvement	15	57	20.83
Testimonials	20	52	27.78
Included with price breakup	45	27	62.5

Website Marketing Characteristics

In the website evaluation of marketing characteristics, most of the websites performed very well in 12 out of 18 characteristics.

However, only 36.11percentage of the resorts and home stays websites offered discounts and promotions. Ecotourism mission was exhibited only in 15.28 percentages of the websites and only 20.83percentage exhibited local community involvement.

Out of the total websites 50 percentage have online reservation capabilities and only 29.17 percentage accept online payment for reservations. 50 percentage of the sites accepted reservations via email. It was found that

73.61percentage offered information on price of the tour packages, activities and room tariffs and 62.5percentage of the sites informed the price break up in their websites.97.22 percentage of the sites had good quality text content and 95.83 percentage provided quality pictures on their website.

Majority of the websites (95.83percentage) provided pictures of the resorts or homestays and 94.44percentage of the websites provided quality pictures of the rooms offered by them. There was a clear description of products and services offered by 87.5percentage of the resorts and homestays websites and description of amenities by 95.83percentage of the websites. A map showing the location of the establishment was visible in 72.22 percentage of the websites and 75percentage of the resorts and homestays gave information on the direction to reach there. Only 27.78percentage had testimonials section on their websites and 47.22 percentage of the websites had links to other tourist information.

This study analyzed the website design and marketing characteristics of Coastal Karnataka resorts and homestays. Attributes related to website design characteristics such as Interactivity, navigation, and functionality and marketing characteristics such as whether the websites have photographs of the resorts/homestays and rooms, provide information on the products and activities offered, information on the price/ tariff and links to tourism based information for the tourists were analyzed on each website. The websites were accessed and analyzed based on the Internet site evaluation form to examine whether they were using Internet as a marketing tool.

Majority of the websites had no description of ecotourism product or mission on their websites. There was no description or explanation whether the establishments are involved in the local community events .Most of the websites lacked information on their contribution in protecting the local environment or their role in educating the tourists and locals about ecotourism. Some of the websites offered information on ecotourism mission and products. Only 11 out of 72 websites presented information on ecotourism mission and 15 websites described their involvement in the local community. Out of 72 websites only 3 offered links to ecotourism information websites. Involvement of the resorts and homestays with the local community in giving jobs or educating them about environment conservation forms part of the ecotourism philosophy.

Resorts and homestay establishments often function in remote areas in the natural wilderness hence if they have a website they need to give information on their location and direction to reach that place. Most of the sites provided their contact details for reservation as well as their physical address. A majority of the websites exhibited a location map as tourist to such resorts and homestays need to know where the place is situated and just a physical address of the establishment will not ensure that the tourists will know how to reach that place.

The websites used background colours, images and pictures of the establishments ,the rooms and other amenities ,places for site seeing, adventure and nature activities and wildlife to market their offerings to the potential visitors. It is essential that the guests of these resorts and websites have a clear idea what they can expect when they are buying the tourism services hence the majority of the websites gave clear description of the services they were offering .

 Resorts and homestays are located in remote areas in the natural wilderness away from the towns and cities .These are sometimes within some forest areas with wildlife and travelling to such places can be uncomfortable and time consuming for the tourists. Several establishments have also limited electricity, hot water or other modern amenities and facilities. Most of the websites described the situation clearly to ensure that the potential tourist have a perfect understanding what to expect while availing the services as well the situations and circumstances they may have to face.

The resort and homestays operators are underutilizing the internet even though there is a greater potential to reach out to a wider audience with well designed quality websites.Though these establishments are having a website there is much scope for improvising on the quality,design and features to increase their reach.

Since these resorts and homestays are offering nature and adventure based tourism which is part of ecotourism, they need to add content related to local community involvement and nature conservation so as to attract nature based tourists to their establishments.

CONCLUSION

Website content evaluation of resort and homestays in Coastal Karnataka indicate that they are underutilizing the potential features of Internet technology and not effectively marketing their tourism services. In India there has been a revolutionary growth in smartphone sales resulting in a greater usage of internet. This growth would be benefiting tourism marketers and operators who could use internet with its multimedia features to reach out to potential travellers. The websites can be improvised by additional features such as virtual tours, using audio and video features, animation, information on the weather, multilingual facilities and links to tourism information centres and updated exchange rates etc. The findings are limited to website design and marketing characteristics of resorts and homestays websites in Coastal Karnataka.Interpretaion of the website usability and design content are subjective. There could be different interpretations based on individual visitor's view of the websites. This study of website evaluation and content analysis focused on a select group of resorts and homestays in Coastal Karnataka.

Note: This article is based on the information and data collected for Ph.D Thesis on Ecotourism Marketing

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