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Rocha, Alvaro and Victor, José Avelino

University Fernando Pessoa, High Institute of Maia

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QUALITY OF HOTELS WEBSITES – PROPOSAL FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF AN ASSESSMENT METHODOLOGY

Álvaro Rocha
University Fernando Pessoa

José Avelino Victor
High Institute of Maia

In this article we propose a research whose main objective will be to reach a methodology for assessment, comparing and improving the quality of hotels Websites. The need for this methodology is justified by the fact that, so far, we haven´t identified any methodology that widely integrates and focus the technical quality and the content quality of the Websites.

INTRODUCTION

Tourism is now one of the greatest social and economic phenomena of the contemporary world (Sarpley 2002, WTO 2008), in which Internet is a facilitator instrument of the relationships between touristic products and touristic entities with whom they relate.

Simultaneously, tourism is one of the domains where Internet is more used. In terms of sales, touristic products such as last minute air tickets, hotel rooms and package promotions are the most sold via the Internet, if not considering the sale of books (Arlt 2006). Thus, the Internet works as a main mechanism of reserves.

In this context, marketing via the Internet has larger advantages than other means (Douglas & Mills 2004): it reduces the costs of divulgation and publicity activities; it eases the brochures and pamphlets update; it eases and turns its procedure more economical comparing, for example,

with the telephone channel; the information is available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

Thus, the hotels Websites becomes a competitive differentiation piece of the modern times, facilitating both the potential customers.

APPROACHES FOR WEBSITES QUALITY ASSESSMENT

The issues related to quality have been worrying many activity sectors in recent years particularly those associated with services and advanced technologies. Various contributions to the quality field as well as different thought schools have focused mainly on the quality definition and how to measure it (Mich et al. 2003).

In this paper we adopt the quality definition of ISO (International Organization for Standardization), whether by falls in the same goals, or for its comprehensiveness and completeness, or its prestige of the entity in question, or its adoption in other important investigations (Mich et al. 2003, Ho-Won et al. 2004). Therefore, we believe that quality is "the totality of characteristics (of the product or service) as the basis for satisfying the needs specified and implied" (ISO 1994).

Relatively to the approaches for assessment, comparison and improvement of enforcement of quality requirements by Websites, we can identify two in literature:

1. Methodologies focused on the Websites technical quality;
2. Methodologies focused on the Websites content quality;

The first approach makes use of models or standards of software quality and methods focused on the usability, derived from research in human-computer interaction area (HCI).

The models of the first group include ISO standards, particularly the ISO-9126 (2001) for requirements and ISO-14598 (1998) for process guiding. The second group includes the approach that appeared with the hypermedia Web design and the importance of the interface conception to accelerate the information access and improve the overall human-computer interaction. This approach defines quality in terms of usability [e.g., Obeso 2004, http://www.useit.com/alertbox) taking into account the user´s view.

The second approach relies on the methodologies based on Likert scale surveys, to assess the content quality near the respondents, who are experts related to the content displayed on Websites or common users. In this approach stands out, for example, the work of Jadad (1998), Meric (2002) and Bernstam et al. (2005).

There is a third approach that is being considered sometimes, based on the known dimension of online services quality, which includes, for example, hotel booking. Despite the distinction, we not considered this approach, because the dimension on which is based is, often, integrated in the technical dimension of websites quality.

PROBLEM, QUESTIONS AND RESEARCH AIM

The conducted exploratory literature review showed us that the assessing aspects of the Websites technical quality and content quality are focused on a disconnected form.

The problem that triggers the proposal of research for this article stems from the fact that, to date, we have not identified a methodology that integrates into one "package" and in a comprehensive manner the two approaches for assessing Websites: technical quality and content quality.

Accordingly, we listed a number of issues that will preside the underlying project for this research proposal:

• Is there a methodology for assessment, comparing and improving the Websites quality that comprehensively integrates the two quality approaches?

• If yes, it will be possible to adapt it to the hotels Websites?

• If not, it will be possible do develop a new methodology?

The main aim of the proposed research will be to reach a methodology that can assess, compare and improve the hotels Websites in a comprehensive manner, integrating the technical quality aspect with the content quality aspect, such like in figure 1.

Figure 1. Main dimensions of websites quality
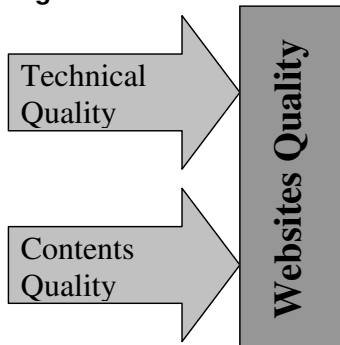
METHODOLOGY

Initially there is made a detailed review of the literature to identify approaches and existing methodologies related to the Websites quality assessment. From these results, if not identified any methodology that meets all the criteria underlying our purpose, will be selected methodologies that can contribute significantly to the development of a first version of the methodology that we have propose to reach.

After will be conducted an inquiry for specialists of Websites development and for users (managers/costumers and end-users) to set attributes and other elements that lead to a complement of the initial version of the proposed methodology, that integrate in a comprehensive manner the issues of technical quality and content quality of the hotels Websites. For the inquiry we relied mainly on semi-structured interviews.

Finally, the methodology will be validated by audit/assessment experts of Websites quality, before taking out a study of cases for the methodology application for its final validation, in which Websites development specialists, managers/costumers and users will apply the methodology. At the end will be interviewed to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the methodology, with a consequent improvement. The resulting methodology is the main contribution to add to the existing knowledge in the field of Web quality.

FINAL REMARKS

From the study made until now we found that the methodologies for the Websites quality assessment do not adequately cover the two major dimensions related to that same quality: technical quality and content quality.

Thus, we consider appropriate to develop a methodology to fill that gap, that is, a comprehensive approach that integrates the assessment of the technical quality and the content quality of the hotels Websites. This methodology will mean the main contribute of the proposed research.

Finally, the methodology will be validated by audit/assessment experts of Websites quality, before taking out a study of cases for the methodology application for its final validation, in which Websites development specialists, managers/costumers and users will apply the methodology. At the end will be interviewed to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the methodology, with a consequent improvement. The resulting methodology is the main contribution to add to the existing knowledge in the field of Web quality.

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Álvaro Rocha (amrocha@ufp.edu.pt) is an Associate Professor at University Fernando Pessoa, Department of Science & Technology, Pr. 9 de Abril, 349, 4249-004 Porto, Portugal.

José Avelino Victor (javemor@ismai.pt) is a Teacher at High Institute of Maia, Av. Carlos Oliveira Campos - Castelo da Maia, 4475-690 Avioso S. Pedro, Portugal.