

# **ONLINE MARKETING COMMUNICATION: EVALUATION OF CORPORATE TOURISM RECREATION WEBSITES IN PORTUGAL**

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**ABSTRACT:** The need for business organizations to interact with their stakeholders in developing strategies applied to business leads to a demand for innovative communication processes with the use of New Information and Communication Technologies (NICTs). The massive use and popularization of the Internet allows the application of this tool as a communication medium par excellence in organizational communication processes, namely through their websites. The lack of studies on this research area, using the sector of tourism recreation companies (TRC) as a case study, led to the choice of this economic tourism sub-sector – the Portuguese TRC registered in National Registration of Tourism Recreation Agents (RNAAT). This study aims to evaluate the effectiveness of online marketing communication through corporate websites. Thus, the development of the research seeks to examine how TRC managers are using the NICT in general and the web for communication and interaction among its stakeholders in particular. The methodology aims to incorporate elements of several partial analysis tools studied in the literature review and this allows a descriptive analysis of the analyzed website content, as well as of the degree of intensity the TRC use the NICT to disseminate information and provide interaction with their audiences. The results show a weak presence of some items, revealing the absence of a definition of communication strategies for online marketing, concluding that there is still a lack of interest in establishing interaction mechanisms of TRC and stakeholders through the website. **Keywords:** Online Marketing Communication, Tourism Recreation Companies, Evaluation of corporate websites, stakeholder interaction.

**RESUMEN:** La necesidad que las organizaciones empresariales establezcan interacción con sus stakeholders en el desarrollo de estrategias aplicadas a los negocios lleva a una busca de procesos de comunicación innovadores con el uso de las nuevas Tecnologías de Información y Comunicación (NTIC). El uso masivo y la popularización de la Internet permiten la aplicación de esta herramienta como un medio de comunicación por excelencia en los procesos de comunicación organizacional, o sea, a través de sus websites. La falta de estudios sobre esta área de investigación, se utilizando el sector de los agentes de animación turística como estudio de caso, llevó a la escogja de este subsector del turismo económico - Empresas de Turismo de Negocios y Animación (BTR) en Portugal registrados en el Registro Nacional de Agentes de Animación Turística (RNAAT). Este estudio tiene como objetivo evaluar la eficacia de la comunicación de marketing online a través de websites empresariales. Así siendo, el desar-

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rollo de la investigación visa analizar la forma como los gestores de BTR utilizan las NTIC en general y la web para la comunicación e interacción entre las partes interesadas, en particular. La metodología tiene como objetivo incorporar elementos de varias herramientas de análisis parcial estudiadas en la revisión de la literatura y que permiten un análisis descriptivo del contenido del site analizado, así como del grado de intensidad que las empresas usan las NTIC para divulgar informaciones e establecer interacción con sus audiencias. Los resultados muestran una débil presencia de algunos puntos, revelando la ausencia de una definición de estrategias de comunicación para el marketing online, concluyendo que todavía hay alguna falta de interés en establecer mecanismos de interacción de las BTR y respectivos stakeholders a través del site. **Palabras clave:** Comunicación de Marketing Online, empresas de animación turística, evaluación de websites corporativos, interacción entre las partes interesadas.

**RESUMO:** A necessidade de as organizações empresariais interagirem com os seus stakeholders no desenvolvimento de estratégias aplicadas aos negócios leva a uma procura de processos de comunicação inovadores com o uso das novas Tecnologias de Informação e Comunicação (NTIC). O uso massivo e a popularização da Internet permitem a aplicação desta ferramenta como um meio de comunicação por excelência nos processos de comunicação organizacional, ou seja, através dos seus websites. A falta de estudos sobre esta área de investigação, utilizando-se o setor dos agentes de animação turística como estudo de caso, levou à escolha deste sub-setor do turismo económico - Empresas de Turismo de Negócios e Animação (BTR) em Portugal registados no Registo Nacional de Agentes de Animação Turística (RNAAT). Este estudo tem como objetivo avaliar a eficácia da comunicação de marketing online através de websites empresariais. Assim, o desenvolvimento da investigação visa analisar a forma como os gestores de BTR utilizam as NTIC em geral e a web para a comunicação e interação entre as partes interessadas, em particular. A metodologia tem como objetivo incorporar elementos de várias ferramentas de análise parcial estudadas na revisão da literatura e que permitem uma análise descritiva do conteúdo do site analisado, bem como do grau de intensidade com que as empresas usam as NTIC para divulgar informações e interagir com as suas audiências. Os resultados mostram uma fraca presença de alguns itens, revelando a ausência de uma definição de estratégias de comunicação para o marketing online, concluindo que há ainda uma falta de interesse em estabelecer mecanismos de interação das BTR e respetivos stakeholders através do site. **Palavras-chave:** Comunicação de Marketing Online, Empresas de Animação Turística, Avaliação de websites corporativos, interação entre stakeholders.

## INTRODUCTION

In a global market where organizational competition is increasingly aggressive, the need arises to assess the impact of business marketing communication as well as the various ways to achieve this, particularly with the use of institutional presence on the Internet.

Marketing communication is gaining growing importance as a vehicle for transparency and credibility of business enterprise, assuming their use of effective transmission of information and knowledge, raising awareness and promoting new attitudes. Their role in the interaction with the various stakeholders provides a support relational logic that long-term power creates advantages by adding value to the various parts (Ferraz & Rafael, 2012a). Over the last decades, the use of new technologies, par-

ticularly the Internet and specifically corporate websites, has attracted the attention of researchers and officials responsible for business management policies.

In the national and international scene, the tourism activity is increasingly playing a major role in world economies, particularly in the Portuguese economy. In this sector and specifically in the area of tourism activities, it has been highlighted by its involvement with a number of protagonists and stakeholders in economic activities contributing to productivity and national competitiveness. Thus, the development of studies which contribute to the analysis and obtaining ways to leverage this type of activity are of high importance.

Through the review and analysis of the results obtained in this study, we intend to establish a framework of recommendations that will enable the development of strategies for effective and efficient communication in the digital environment, taking into account the particularities of the Tourism Subsector Analysis - Tourism Recreation Companies (TRC).

A reflection on the subject of marketing communication and the dissemination and communication tools available to organizations has contributed to the development of this study. The general objective is to observe and analyze how businesses communicate and interact with their audiences through websites, analyzing a group of TRC. The specific objectives are to study the way people communicate using a set of items on the respective platforms, designated by websites, thus contributing towards a better understanding of the business activity in this particular area of the Tourism Sector, and particularly in tourist entertainment activity. This study may contribute towards the stimulation of corporate sites resulting in better TRC communication.

This research seeks to evaluate how entrepreneurs in the area of tourism activities in Portugal are using new information and communication technologies (NICTs) in general and the Internet in particular, as a strategic tool for marketing communication to communicate with stakeholders. Thus, we propose a study ai-

med at measuring the degree of Internet use by TRC, based on the observation of the contents of corporate websites in order to evaluate how these organizations use the web in their marketing communication strategies and interaction with their stakeholders.

To comply with the stated main objective, the aim is to create tools for analyzing data, in order to evaluate the effectiveness of the internet as a tool for communication and dialogue between companies and their *stakeholders*.

Based on the overall goal mentioned above, the following specific objectives were defined:

- To identify a set of strategic indicators for the TRC specific sector;
- To identify a list of items in each strategic indicator;
- To produce a matrix analysis, supported by several authors, who support the analysis of communication in corporate websites;
- To analyze a sample of tourism companies' websites;
- To obtain a set of guidelines for the definition of online communication strategies through the corporate website.

The use of indicators, from a thorough analysis of the literature available on the subject, has contributed to the construction of a sustained analysis matrix, in which 45 assessment items are defined and divided into five areas to support this research.

Records dated from 2009 to 2012 of the TRC that are members of the Portuguese Association of Tourism Recreation, Congresses and Events Companies (APECATE), which represents the industry, were included in the analysis.

The article is structured in four parts. Primarily, Internet themes are addressed as a tool for Corporate Communication, Marketing Online Communication, and the legal framework of the TRC in Portugal. The second part focuses on the evaluation mechanism of communication in the organizational practice of websites. In the third part, the methodology is described and a proposal for a model is presented, which is used in the exploratory study conducted with a sample of Portuguese agents for tourist activities. In the fourth and final section, the most significant re-

sults and findings are presented, and some proposals for future research are put forward.

### **The internet as a tool for corporate communications**

The rapid development of NITC in general, and the Internet in particular, has produced profound changes in recent years in practices and communication strategies involving the corporate sector and tourism industry.

Over the past 25 years there has been an emphasis on technology. However, since 2000, we have been witnessing the truly transformative effect of communication technologies, which pave the way for the development of a wide range of new tools and services that facilitate the interaction between global players worldwide (Buhalis & Law, 2008).

According to several authors (Buhalis, 2003; Buhalis & Law, 2008) the Internet is perceived as a powerful and effective marketing tool in tourism. It is unanimously accepted that it is a valuable tool for information distribution and communication, and maintaining a corporate website is vital for the maintenance of relationships established between companies, by strengthening relationships with the public, and especially with customers, thus capturing a larger market segment (Law et al., 2010).

The Internet, which is widely recognized as a unique communication support is different from all other means of traditional mass communication, such as television, radio and the press, due to its inherent characteristics, which include interactivity, multimedia, and the fact that the users can simultaneously be receivers of information *and* content producers. Apart from these aspects, the web stands out as an important means of communication of knowledge and information in today's society, and enhances the relationship between organizations and their public. It is therefore essential to study how this tool can contribute in this area.

By way of comparison with other media classified as traditional, the web allows a reading of a number of factors, including documents or messages and other information such as hypertext,



which multiply the paths offered by web navigation. The previous media were “separate”, but nowadays they dialogue and interact together favouring an environment that goes from “*multi*” to “*hyper-media*”. Another great advantage compared to alternative media lies in the kind of relationship that facilitates the possibility of “*one to one*”, “*one to many*” and also “*many to many*” communication, in addition to the high degree of interactivity that (the web) provides. This interactivity is therefore one of the differentiating features of the Internet that enables communication between the public and organizations (Ha & James, 1998).

The flexibility and speed of the web make this means of communication one of the main sources of information, allowing organizations to cheaply disclose detailed and updated information, which is permanently available, 24 hours a day (Lindon et al. 2004). Given the specificities of this channel (of communication) it is necessary to have specialized knowledge about it, adapting to the specific characteristics of the public who need to be reached. Elizabeth (2003, 2005) identified a set of three key variables to measure the effectiveness of digital communication, including the degree of processing of information in the digital environment, the degree of visibility and differentiation that exists in cyberspace and the degree of segmentation and personalization which is given to stakeholders.

Several other authors have tried to analyze the impact that the use of the Internet (particularly for corporate websites) causes in corporate communications and relationships with their public (Kent & Taylor, 1998; White & Raman, 1999; Hill & White, 2000; Kent et al., 2003; Lindon et al., 2004).

According to Lindon et al. (2004), the Internet presents itself as an important tool for relationships whose characteristics may be properly exploited in order to obtain a set of ongoing advantages. According to these authors, its use fulfils various requirements, including the possibility to be increasingly close to the user and the point of consumption, and the fact that it enables a link between three factors such as fusion, entertainment and in-

volvement. It can be a tool for individual communication through the individualization of messages and furthermore, through effective interaction, it can make the user an active recipient in the communication process.

### **Online Marketing Communication**

The evolution of NTIC and the speed at which the adoption of new technology-based features occurs, change the way business is conducted, as well as the form of communication and relationship with stakeholders. It affects all areas of activity and is a factor in developing competitiveness, sustainability, and economic communication strategies (Chaudhri & Wang, 2007; MacMahan et al., 2009; França et al., 2011). In a strategic way, organizations should promote an active dialogue with the different stakeholder groups (AECA, 2004; Schultz & Morsing, 2006; AECA, 2006; Jensen & Sandtström, 2011). According to this organization these elements are social groups and individuals directly or indirectly affected by business performance influencing the achievement of their objectives and survival.

The communication established with these elements is considered relevant and must be maintained over time thereby influencing a cooperative relationship, and creating a genuine commitment to them. Thus, the role of communicational interactivity of websites is a differentiator from traditional media, being a major feature of online tools (Downes & Mcmillan, 2000; Chaudhri & Wang, 2007; MacMahan et al., 2009; França et al., 2011). Communication established using these means may potentiate different levels of interactivity, i.e. low or high depending on the different objectives that the organization proposes. Thus, the level of communication may be based only on unidirectional information transmission with the objective of influencing the corporate image, or with a higher level of bidirectional communication, which favours a more effective relationship (Capriotti & Moreno, 2007).

Interactivity is also mentioned by several authors as a relational key aspect, enabling the organization to differentiate itself from its

competitors. França et al. (2011) refer to this capability, indicating the possibility of disclosure specifically to certain *stakeholders* and the appropriate return or feedback. Van Doren et al. (2000) refer to other important strategic aspects in communication using the web, including aspects related to the quality of information provided as well as specific aspects of the use of technology.

McMahan *et al.* (2009) indicate the advantages of online communication, namely the fact that it allows an opportunity for the assertion of corporate identity and the brand, as well as promoting a relational marketing. They also refer to the perception of a relationship between the corporate brand and the time spent on the Internet and on the respective website. Online media are increasingly used to favour brand recognition, which forces institutional organizations to adopt strategies regarding their *stakeholders'* loyalty in the use of corporate websites. The analysis and qualitative assessment of institutional communication on the World Wide Web becomes essential and a priority factor for various organizations and institutions. To achieve the objectives of this study we have used a matrix / analysis framework that includes a set of items scientifically validated in previous studies (Ferraz & Rafael, 2012a, 2012b).

In the continuation we will cover Portuguese tourist recreation activities, focusing on the role and contribution of tourism recreation companies in tourism activities' economy, legal requirements, some further factors of the activities, and in particular the duty of provision of information to its *stakeholders*.

## TOURISM RECREATION COMPANIES IN PORTUGAL

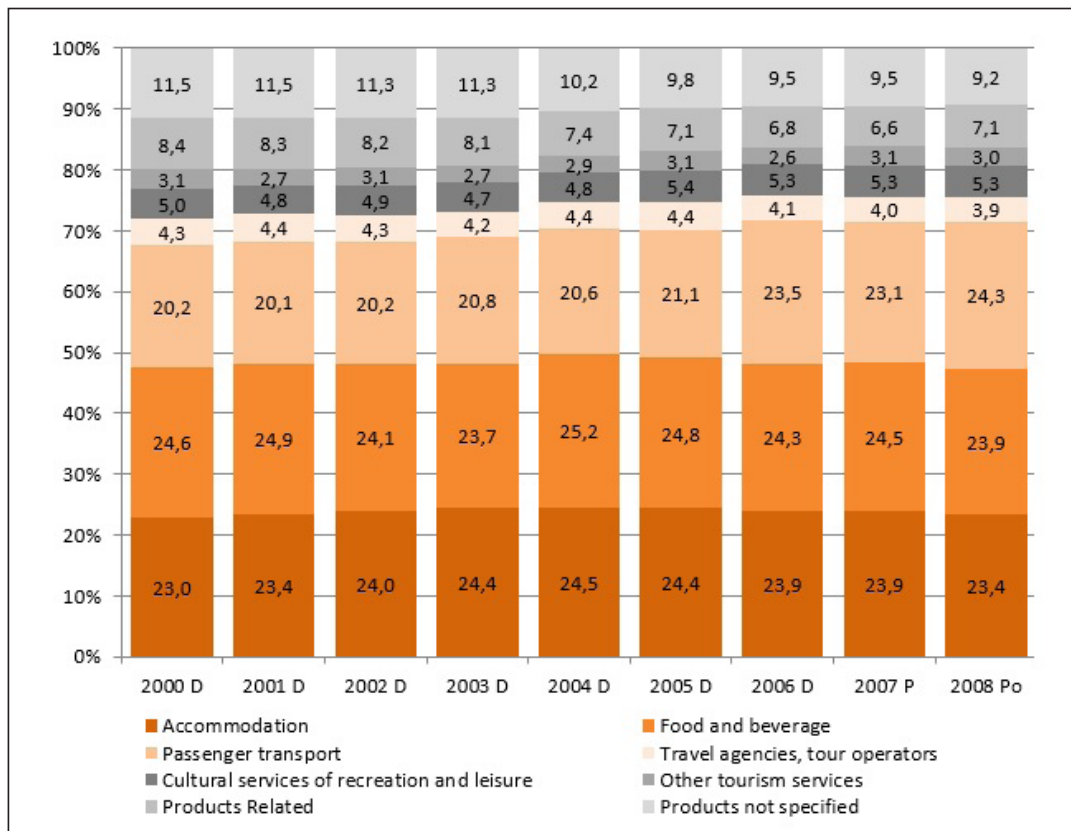
### *The economic activity of TRC in the tourism sector*

The tourism industry involves a diverse set of activities, including services and products, interacting with multiple operators, and takes on complex form which includes the activities developed by TRC. According to the Portuguese tourism authority, Turismo de Portugal IP, there is a set of productive activities that serve the visitor. These are: Accommodation (hotels and similar, second homes used for tourist purposes, either home owners or



non-paying visitors), Catering, Passenger transport, Auxiliary services to passenger transport, Equipment hire for passenger transport, Travel agencies, Tour Operators and Tour Guides, Cultural and Recreation Services and Leisure. According to Costa (2005) taking into account the type of services provided by tourism companies, it is considered that this activity is part of the central sub-set of the tourism sector, particularly in terms of the Cultural Services of Recreation and Leisure component.

Statistical data from Turismo de Portugal, namely the Tourism Satellite Account of Portugal, regarding the 2010 data, indicate an increasing contribution of the cultural component of Services of Recreation and Leisure for tourism consumption in the Economic Territory, representing a bigger importance, thus enabling the stimulation of national economic growth, as can be seen in the following graphic:



**Graphic 1: Components of tourism consumption in the Economic Territory by Products - %**

Source: Tourism Satellite Account of Portugal - Indicators of tourism economic activity in Portugal - 2010

According to Graphic 1, growth is visible, although modest in the Cultural Services of Recreation and Leisure component, in the period of 2000 to 2008, showing an evolution that contributes to the affirmation of its importance in tourism consumption in the economic area of products.

### **The legal framework for Tourism Recreation activity**

The legal framework for tourism recreation activity is relatively recent in the Portuguese tourism sector. Its appearance is linked to a set of legal documents, namely in 2000 and 2003, through the Decree-Law nr. 204/2000 dated September 1<sup>st</sup> and the Decree-Law nr. 108/2002 April 16<sup>th</sup>, respectively. The emergence of these regulations, as well as their updating demonstrates the growing interest in the standardization of the activities related to the study area.

Initially, through the first Decree-Law referred to above, basic regulations were established regarding this activity in this specific type of business. It was conceived to safeguard the interest of tourists who use the services provided by companies in this tourism subsector, including providing the necessary guarantees to safeguard the rights of consumers. It was the first step in this legal area arising from the recognition of its strategic importance and the growing interest in activities normally designated as active tourism, adventure tourism and those that provide the new concept of «offering experiences».

In a second phase, subsequent legislation established a set of basic concepts, notably about the entities that are considered tourism companies, specifically mentioning recreational activities, culture, sports and leisure, which contribute to tourism development in a particular region and are not considered as tourism developments, tourism enterprises in rural areas, country houses, catering or drinking establishments, travel agencies and maritime tour operators.

Hence the RNAAT, designated as the National Registration of Tourism Recreation Agents (RNAAT) was created with particu-

lar regard to Tourism Recreation Companies and Maritime Tour Operators, under the guidance of Turismo de Portugal, I. P., seeking to organize and update the agents operating in the market, thereby enabling a better monitoring and tracking of the development of the sector and better monitoring by public authorities. Thus the law seeks to encourage investment in this sub-area of tourism, streamlining procedures and reducing administrative costs and enhancing the quality and diversity of what is to offer in tourism recreation activities and services, promoting a sustainable development of the sector and the tourism industry in general.

More recently and taking into account a number of factors including the sector development, it was found that the legal framework was inadequate and out of touch with reality and in need of a revision. So it became essential to review the legal status of tourist activities, which resulted in the issue of Decree-Law nr. 108/2009 on May 15th. This new law includes the activities of tourism companies, the organization and sales of recreation activities, sports or cultural, in the open air or in fixed facilities, for the purpose of leisure activities and with tourist interest in the region in which they operate. This standard allows the creation of a set of measures to regulate the sector, with the aim of qualifying the offer, protecting natural resources and safeguarding the interests, safety and satisfaction of tourists.

Among the aspects addressed, the requirement for transparent and clear information about the conditions, characteristics and prices of the services provided is established. The aim is also to increase the quality and diversity of tourism recreation services, facilitating and promoting sustainable development industry and tourism in general. Through this legislation, it is indicated that the TRC develop a diverse set of activities, including the following: the organization and sales of recreational, sports, or cultural activities, in the open air or in fixed facilities intended for this purpose. Thus, the activities developed in classified areas or with other natural values are referenced and named "Nature Tourism Activities". However, when developed in other environments,

especially “for-profit” activities on water with boats, it is denominated “Maritime Tourism”. In short, nature tourism activities can be designated as those which take place in certain areas classified as protected areas, in qualified natural environments, provided they are recognized as such by the Institute for Nature Preservation and Biodiversity, also known as the ICNB.

In the development of this research, a population that only included the tourism companies listed in APECATE and registered in the RNAAT, at the time of the study was studied. According to the data obtained through the RNAAT, the total number of registered TRC is 1.543, divided into Tourism Recreation Operators ( $n = 888$ ; that means 58%) and Maritime Tour Operators ( $N = 655$ , 42% of total).

### **Disclosure of information**

Article 6 of the current legislation, (Decree-Law nr. 108/2009 of May 15<sup>th</sup>), provides that it is the duty of TRC to inform their customers about a number of aspects related with their activity. Thus, prior to their service being contracted and to the start of the activity, they have the duty to inform customers, in a clear and objective way about the specific features of the activities to be undertaken; the difficulties and inherent risks; the necessary equipment when not provided by the company; the minimum and maximum age allowed; the services available and their respective prices; rules for the use of equipment; the relevant environmental legislation; the procedures to adopt in dangerous or emergency situations; and information on the training and experience of its employees.

This information may be available on the website facilitating consultation of such content. In the particular case of companies that develop activities recognized as nature tourism, they should provide the public with information about the experience and training of their employees regarding the environment, natural heritage and nature preservation. Since corporate websites are a useful source of information available to the public including

customers, in this study it is considered as relevant information of the specific characteristics and detailed activities and services, environmental legislation and safety rules as well as the curricula and professional experience of its employees. This information set follows the guideline of Lindon et al. (2004) in which the communication process of the entity must transmit using a diverse set of strategies, not just communicating corporate identity, but also the level of service, performance and added value compared with the competition.

The items listed will be taken into consideration when analyzing the content of information and communication, which the study focuses on.

### **The Assessment of Communication in Corporate WebSites**

The development of the Internet and especially the World Wide Web, will allow the opening of new channels of communication and interaction, as well as changing the way people relate. Business organizations are not unaware of this new reality, and are looking to optimize their efficiency in their relationship with the various protagonists involved in their activity.

There is currently widespread use of the Web as an information tool by companies in various sectors. This use is overtaking other more traditional methods for various reasons, such as the reach, cost and feasibility. Another interesting aspect indicated by Holtz (2005), was the fact that it enables a closer relationship between businesses and consumers, thus contributing to a greater involvement of *stakeholders*. Based on such reality, companies are increasingly investing in communication strategies so that their *stakeholders* can obtain a credible thorough knowledge about their activities and their role in the business market.

The companies have the responsibility of communicating and distributing information, which can contribute to generating knowledge of the organization. Therefore the study aims to assess how the distribution of information is being conducted to on the TRC Websites recognized by Turismo de Portugal.



Part of the work that directly influenced this research were the studies recently conducted by Ferraz & Rafael (2012a, 2012b) which focused on social responsibility communication indicators on the Websites of major hotel groups operating in Portugal and on the online communication of social responsibility in tourism companies in Portugal. The latter provided the motivation for the development of a more generic study on the use of the website as a communication tool for this sub-sector of tourism companies.

The performance evaluation of websites has been a constant concern for many researchers, as evidenced by the literature (Liu et al., 1997; Simeon, 1999; Huizingh, 2000; Bauer & Scharl, 2000; Palmer, 2002).

Some studies focus on specific aspects; others feature a selection of subjective criteria that require a more in-depth theoretical justification. More recent studies overcome the major weaknesses of previous models, such as the model used by Miranda (Miranda & Bañegil, 2004) which is used to compare the level of Internet use by the 200 largest Spanish companies, or more recently by the same author (Miranda et al., 2009), used to evaluate the potential of the Municipality websites of the main European cities. Both studies employ an instrument for evaluating sites known as WAI (Web Assessment Index) that combines four broad categories that assess the quality of websites: accessibility, speed, navigability and content.

After undertaking an extensive search of available literature, the next stage was to choose the categories and factors validated by several authors, previously mentioned, and which are critical to the effectiveness of the website. The resulting indicators and respective items, described in 5.2, were later adapted to the study, as during the research no work specifically related to the TRC was found.

## METHODOLOGY

### **Proposed Model**

Based on the literature review, a model was put together, which included a set of five dimensions; two relating to Navigability

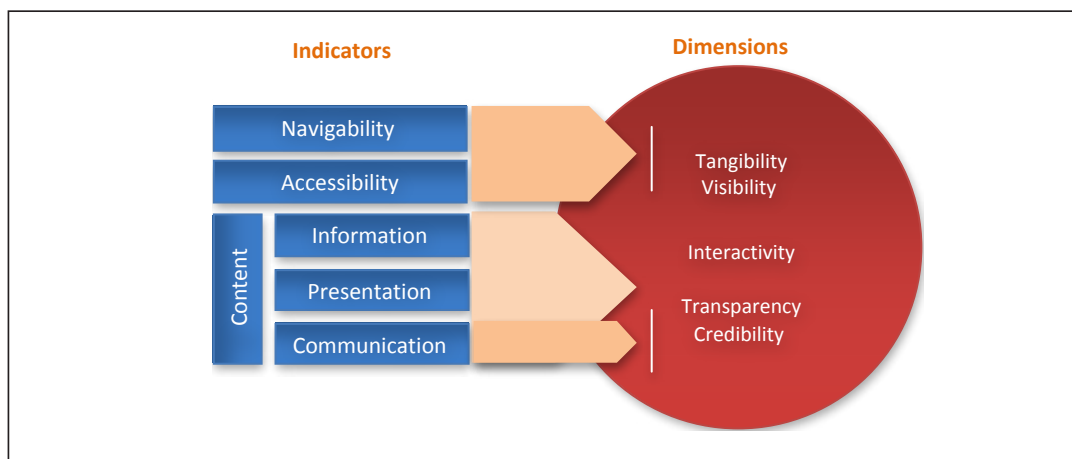
and Accessibility and the remaining three related to the contents of the site, such as the Information, Communication and Presentation and *media* resources. Five dimensions were also considered that included the following indicators: Navigability and Accessibility, for the Tangibility and Visibility dimension and Transparency, Credibility and Interactivity dimensions which include a communication indicator, as shown in figure 1.

The Tangibility and Visibility dimensions investigate how available and accessible the corporate website is via common search engines, such as Google. This dimension is included in the model, without however being analyzed in the pilot study.

The transparency dimension ascertains the degree of transparency in communication, such as the availability of news and sharing comments from entities not belonging to the company.

The Credibility dimension considers all contents of communication that sustain the reputation and credibility of the organization such as the disclosure of Social Responsibility actions or the dissemination of the curricula of its directors and employees.

Last, but not least, comes the Interactivity dimension that is transversal to the Information, Communication and Presentation indicators.



**Figure 1 – Proposed Model**  
 Source: Authors' Own

The pilot study was developed in two distinct phases. In the first phase, a survey of the tourism companies listed in the National Tourism Registration (RNAAT) was conducted, including

the TRC. As mentioned above, the object of the study population is only devoted to TRC as recorded in RNAAT at the time of the study.

From the nearly 900 companies registered in RNAAT, only companies which are members of the Portuguese Association of Tourism Recreation, Congresses and Events Companies (APE-CATE), registered between 2009 and 2012 were filtered.

Based on a literature review, a set of indicators was used and considered, to help assess communication items on the websites of TRC selected and researched, and a descriptive analysis of the results was subsequently performed.

### **Web communication Indicators**

The indicators selected for the study were defined taking into account a number of aspects, including basic indicators proposed in the recent study (Ferraz & Rafael, 2012b), as well as the current legal framework and organizational reality of TRC. Therefore, the evaluation of websites took into account the use and adaptation of the indicators proposed by different authors, related to communication on corporate websites as mentioned above.

Table 1 presents a list of the indicators and respective dimensions used in this study, as well as a detailed list of items:

In accordance with the aforementioned table, a set of five indicators were used to analyze the TRC websites: two relating to Navigability and Accessibility and the remaining three to the site contents, including Information, Communication, Presentation and *media* resources.

Regarding the first indicators „Navigability and Accessibility” the choice of items aligned with those referred to by Miranda et al., 2009; Palmer, 2002, namely about existing resources on the websites that allow the first visual contact with the designated *home page*.

These indicators provide further analysis of existing web page resources that facilitate navigation following first contact with the website.

**Table 1 - Indicators list used in the observation**

Indicators	Evaluated Items	
Navigability	Sitemap Internal Search Engine Contact / contact us	Multilingual Contents FAQs and Help Comments and suggestions
Accessibility	Presence in the search engines Accessibility for people with disabilities	Google Result Page Ranking Sponsored Link
Contents: Information	Company Profile, Mission, Vision, Values Products and services catalogue Detailed information of services/activities Prices Security and Confidentiality Region and local products Promotion Organisational chart and administrative structure	Partnerships Institutes and Foundations Social responsibility External links Security and privacy policies Suggestions and complaints
Communication and Public Relations	News Corporate events calendar Professional Training of employee Employment opportunities and internships Licensing, classification and associations Association (eg APECATE) Portugal Tourism, Tourism National Registration Certification or awards (excellence and quality)	Feedback Contacts: general E-mail Chat, Forum Questionnaires, inquiries Partnerships Social Networks links Newsletter Blog
Content: Presentation <i>media</i> resources	Text Gallery Image Interactive contents of on-page / <i>Rich content</i>	Video Audio Forms Files and applications to download

*Source: Authors' Own*

The information and communication content is a critical component of any website (Van Doren et al. 2000). If the information provided is not correct or up to date, it is not fulfilling its purpose. Thus, the quality of the website content should be measured to assess the presence of relevant information that meets the requirements of its users, who, for the purposes of this study

include the public or stakeholders. In this sense, the “Information” indicator reflects elements of an institutional character related to the company in the various recreation company sites studied. Therefore contents were considered with explicit information about the mission, vision and values of the company: as well as the history, the company profile, including disclosing detailed information about their products, services and activities. Items such as: organizational structure and management structure; established Partnerships; biographical information and CVs of their executives and employees were grouped in this indicator since they are part of the list of information requirements contained in the legislation that regulates the industry. The reference to Social Responsibility policies and dissemination of such actions was also analysed.

Another indicator studied was “Presentation of content and *media* resources” involving an analysis of the use of text in the presence and absence of multimedia communication, through the combination of different information formats such as video, audio and photos and interactive content, such as newsletter or files and applications available for download.

The “Communication” indicator shows some aspects related to communication and related to the public in general. Considering that sites are often entry points for various audiences (customers, suppliers, local community, etc.) who wish to obtain access to mixed information, a deeper, detailed and personalized contact with users should be facilitated. In order to assess the communication ability of each site, checks are made to see if the site contains the following items: certification or awards attesting to the excellence and quality of services provided; feedback obtained from users, perception of the relevance of active participation through direct contact, chat, discussion forum, questionnaires or forms, external links and partnerships with various institutions.

In summary, the methodology used in this study to evaluate website communication considers several indicators comprising several items which are measured based on a binary scale no / yes (0/1).



## DATA COLLECTION

Data collection was accomplished through the Internet, by observing, exploring and analysing the content of the website pages of some TRC. Since this is a pilot study, it was decided to restrict the observation to a limited group of companies including those belonging to the association APECATE <sup>1</sup> and registered over the last three years and the present year (2009, 2010, 2011 and 2012). Note that the database collected from RNAAT does not contain information about the addresses of websites of registered companies. This omission led us to cross check information with the APECATE members list to obtain the addresses of the respective sites. For cases where this information was not available, search engines were used, using the company name and brand in order to find the address of corporate websites.

**Table 2: Analysed TRC Corporate Websites**

Company name	Website	No. and Year of Registration
About Dreams	Site not found	197/2012
Big Desafios Lda	big-desafios.pt	131/2009
Caminhos da História	Site not found	014/2012
Casa na Àrvore	www.casanaarvore.pt	351/2011
Cereja Eventos	<a href="http://ww.cerejaaventura.com">ww.cerejaaventura.com</a>	086/2010
Ecoevasão	www.ecoevasoes.pt	091/2009
Fernandes Couto & Loureiro Miranda	Available soon	147/2012
Funsea	www.funsea.pt	163/2011
Lago Queiroz	Site not found	112/2012
Lisbon Bike	www.lisbonbiketour.com	195/2012
Natureza Vertical	www.naturezavertical.com	141/2011
Pesnoar	Site not found	285/2011
Pleasures Pleasures	www.pleasures.com.pt (under construction)	183/2012
Pocean Surf Academy	www.pocean.pt	283/2011
Primexperience	www.primexperience.pt	296/2010
Roteiro de Emoções	www.haveawineday.com	055/2012
Trilhos & Lagoas	www.trilhoselagoas.com	373/2010
TurninGreen	www.turningreen.pt (No links)	192/2011
WiseNature	www.wisenature.pt	094/2012

*Source: Authors' Own*

From the initial TRC list, the sites for 9 out of a total of 19 companies selected were not found or were not accessible (with a message of “Coming Soon” or “Under construction”). It was also found that two of the sites identified had no institutional information but redirected to a website with content and information about events or specific activities of tourism recreation. Thus, the result was a list of 10 companies with corresponding websites validated for observation.

It was found that companies whose sites were not located registered recently, so it follows that these companies are beginning their activity and do not yet have a website.

Table 2 below presents the valid list of websites that have been visited. Companies are listed alphabetically by name, and have an institutional website and constitute the sample used in the observation, which are indicated with shading.

## RESULTS

After having identified the TRC institutional websites identified in the previous list, we proceeded with the content analysis, starting at the home page and then navigating in depth to the content pages via the menu options. The charts below illustrate the data and respective analysis.

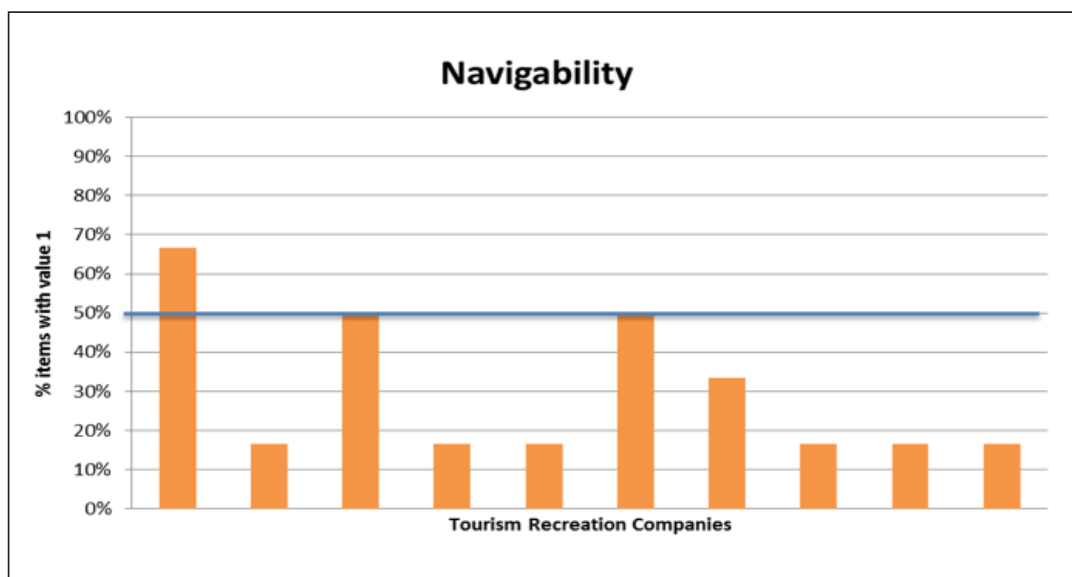
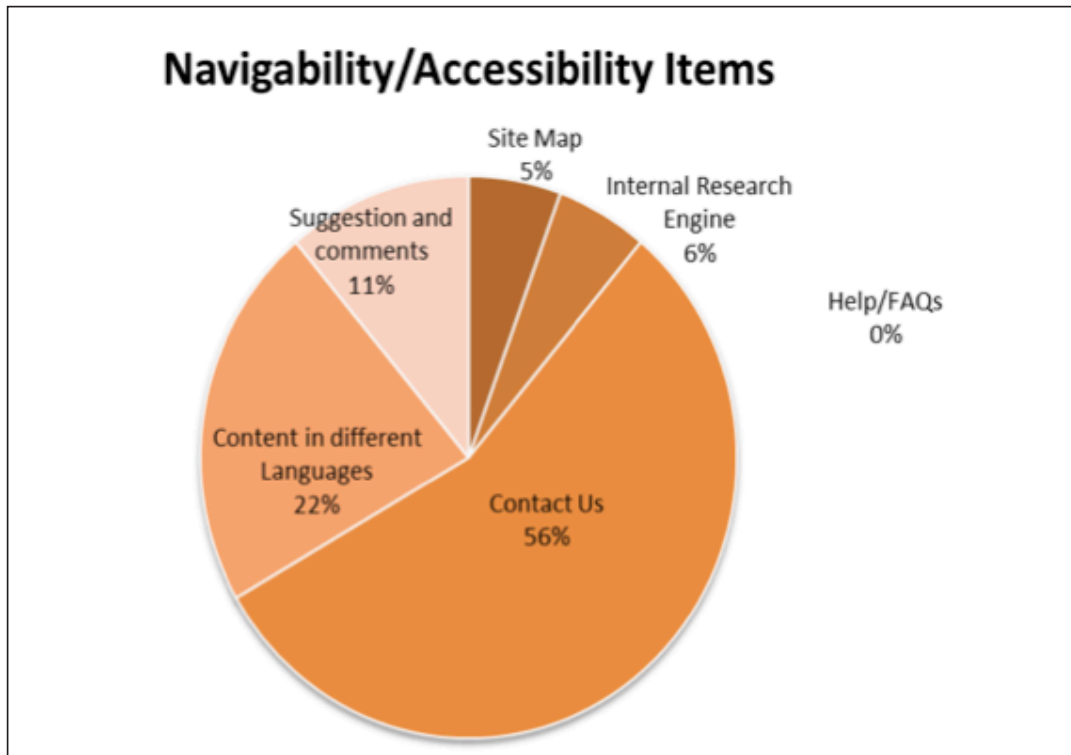


Figure 2a: Navigability and Accessibility Indicator



**Figure 2b: Navigability and Accessibility Indicator**

The first indicator that was examined was “Navigability / Accessibility”. This allowed the examination of features on the homepage that facilitate access to content or information provided on the site such as internal search engine, site map, etc.. As a result, it was found that only one of the ten analysed companies displays the website navigation with significant levels of navigability, while the rest exhibit reduced levels, with two close to 50%. However, contact links were identified in all the observations. The accessibility of content in multiple languages was one of the items that showed a significant percentage, although the results are below those expected for companies engaged in the provision of services to national *and* international audiences. The remaining items that allow more interactivity between the company and the interested public, namely internal search, site map, comments and suggestions, help mechanisms and FAQ’s, recorded lower results in the observations (between 0% and 11%), as shown in Figure 2b).

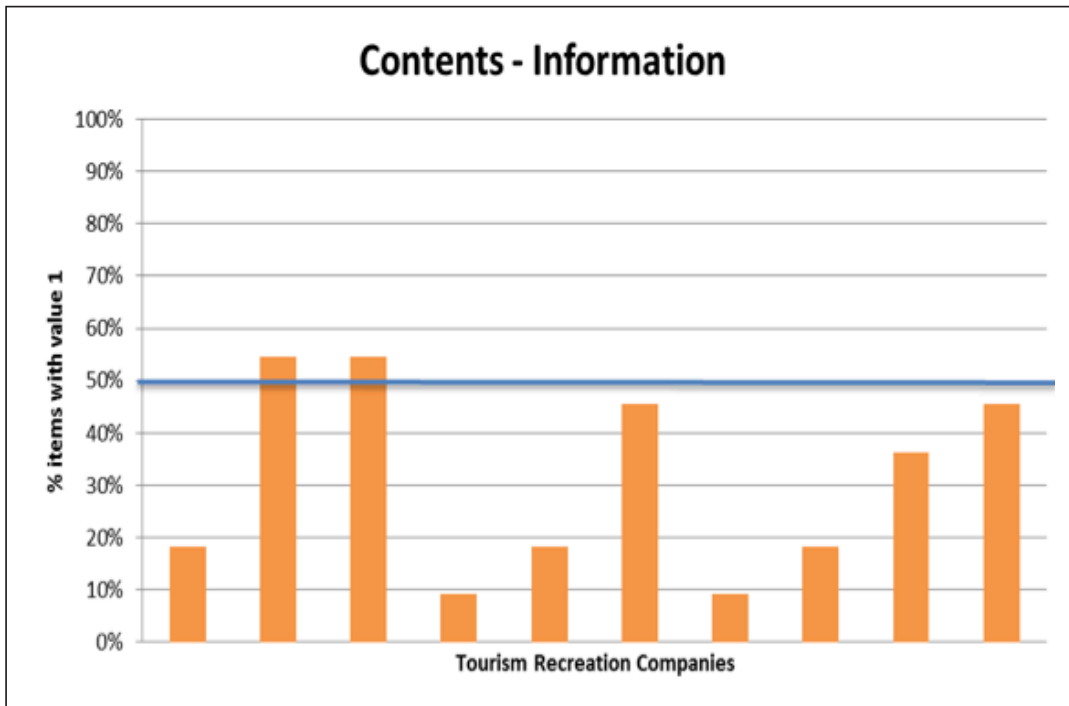


Figure 3a: Summary of Contents - Information

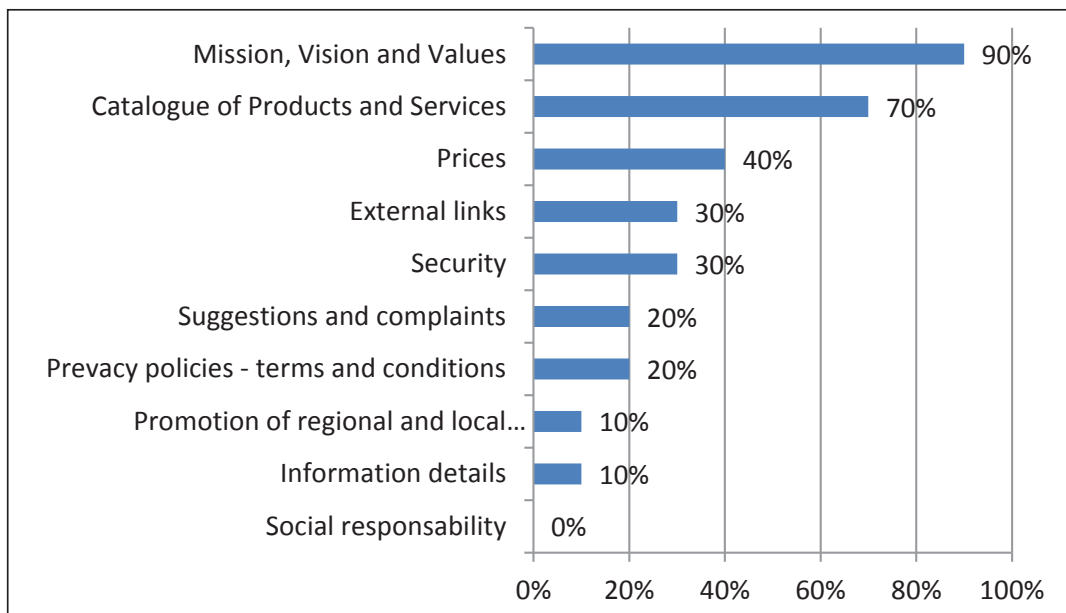


Figure 3b: Summary of Contents - Information

The second indicator which was analysed was the “Content-information” which allowed the examination of the contents of the website. This indicator covers items made available on websites that provide a more in-depth understanding of the work and

structure of companies and allow an opinion to be formed about these organizations, such as the presence of a set of variables that provide information on the company profile, and managers and employees profiles by providing a more detailed view about the company’s management and partnerships with other entities.

Generally, all companies have some content with specific information about the services provided, albeit with a low level of detail. Few companies (40%) provide information about online prices and the same occurs with disclosing partnerships. While security is an extremely important aspect for this subsector of tourism, only a low percentage (30%) of the companies observed provide information of this nature.

The content analysis allows us to verify that the item that stands out most is information about the company profile with 90%, and 70%, for the range of products and services available to customers, which leads to the conclusion that companies basically use the website for communication and exposure of their products and services. At 0% are items related to the disclosure of Social Responsibility actions content involving the community and partnerships with institutes or agencies of public interest.

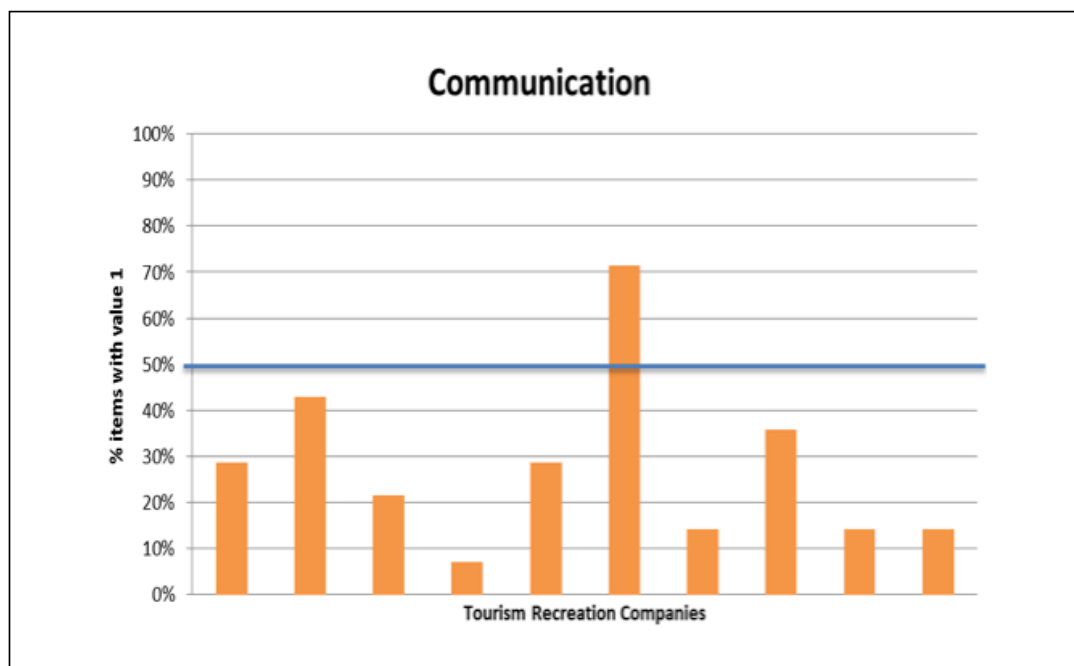
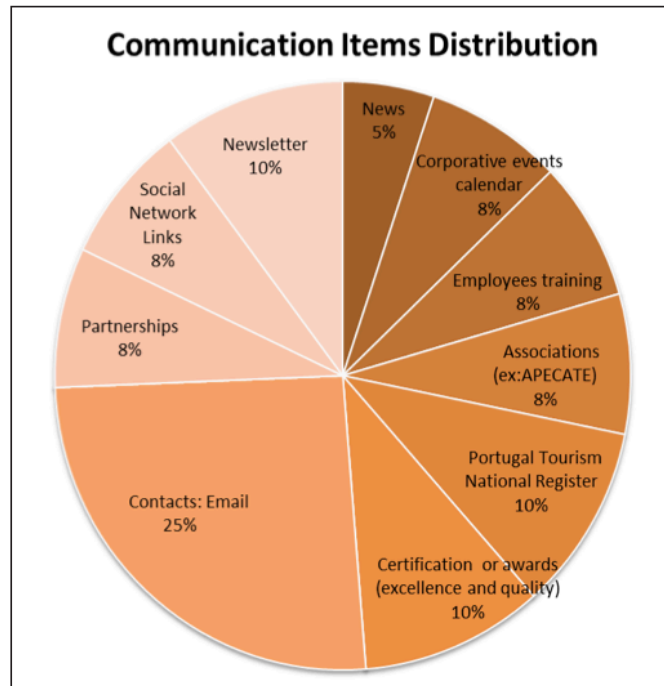


Chart 4a: Communication Indicator



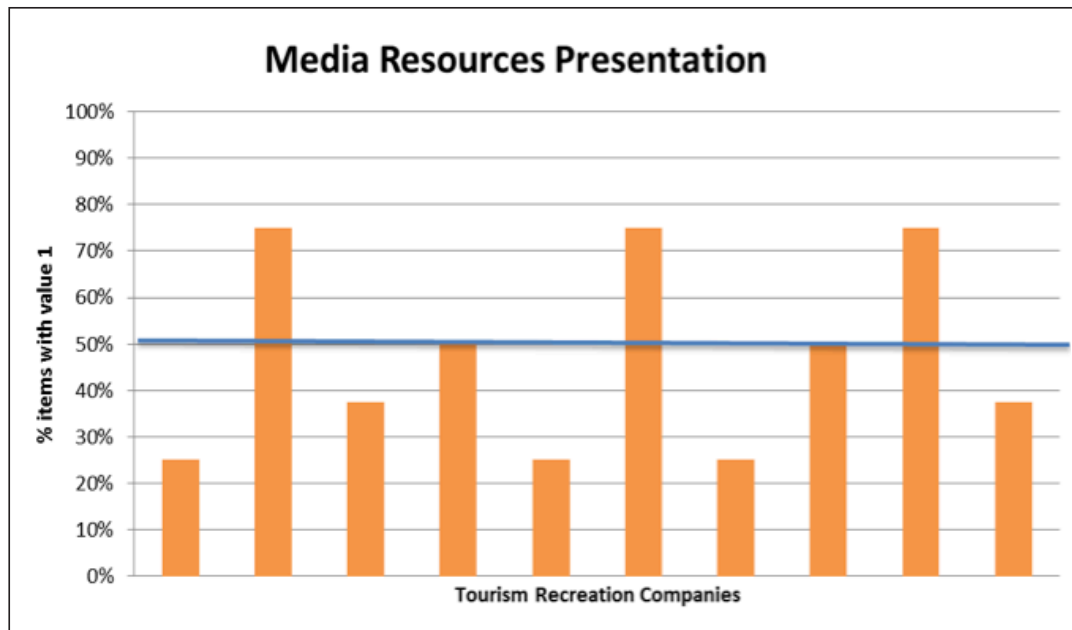


**Figure 4b: Communication Indicator**

“Communication and Public Relations”, is the third indicator which was analysed, and allowed the examination of various aspects related to online communication and the relationship of TRC with its stakeholders. Analysis revealed that only one of the companies observed excels at online communication through respective corporate websites reaching a significant proportion of sites (about 70%). The remaining companies have values below 50% and some even lower than 15% and 10%.

Blog, chat, discussion forum, survey, job opportunities and internships are completely ignored items on the TRC websites that were analysed, i.e. feedback is practically non-existent. According to the proportional distribution of grouped items in this set, presented in Figure 4 b), e-mail is used as the main instrument of online relationship, being available in all the sites observed. Other items such as communication of awards, certification and registration in the database of Turismo de Portugal and subscription newsletter, are distributed in the same proportion. Others such as employee training, events, social networks connection, external links and partnerships and associations with AT regulators sec-

tor agents are equally distributed in equal percentages (8%). The broadcasting of news item is the least considered.



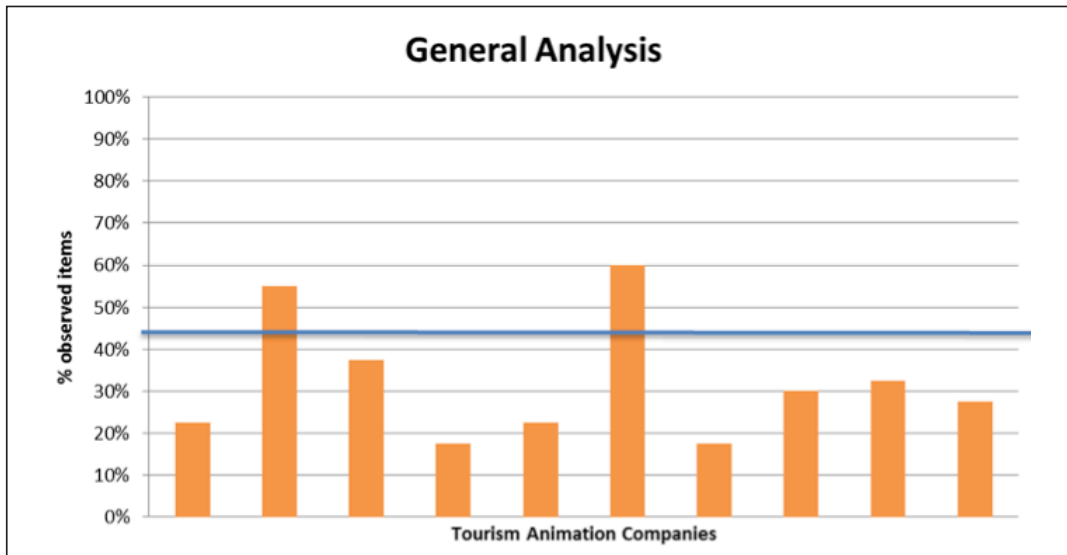
**Figure 5: Media resources Presentation**

An important indicator of the performance and website quality is in the content presentation format. This is the indicator that reveals higher levels of presence in the companies studied. In the latter indicator analysed, the “Presentation of content”, we find that all companies communicate with their audiences primarily using content in text format. The image is the second most used format. Video is used on a lesser scale, and audio is used by only one of the companies to make resources available for download such as catalogues, e-brochures, images, applications for mobile devices, pdf files etc. Some companies have an image gallery on their website and a video gallery with the company’s activities.

A satisfactory number of companies also provides interactive content that establish a link with users, e.g. on-page applications (interactive maps, weather apps etc.) that provide real-time information or registration forms and also activities and events in asynchronous communication.

In general, the companies analysed show a poor use of the internet as a communication and interaction tool in the area of

Tourism Recreation. The majority of TRC registered in recent years present values below 50%, which shows a low effort of communication quality established in the online environment by the Portuguese Tourism Recreation companies analysed, as can be seen in Figure 6.



**Figure 6: General Analysis**

## CONCLUSIONS

The following findings highlight the results:

Companies use the Website primarily as a way to disclose their online services and it is directed exclusively to clients and potential clients, neglecting other stakeholders and interested parties in the practice of tourism recreation activities, whatever its nature;

A lack of interest has been observed in providing content navigation mechanisms, such as site maps and internal search engines. This option can be justified by superficial menu content and reduced volume of information offered, so companies must somehow increase the volume of quality information available to its stakeholders;

Companies do not use the means to divulge partnerships and the information available is primarily addressed to customers, no information is directed to other audiences. TRC did not exploit the potential of the internet in disseminating information or for increasing its credibility and reputation;

TRC are not very aware of the reality and the impact that a strong online presence can provide, particularly with regard to the relationship with those involved. Nowadays social networks are strong and effective communication tools when properly managed. Interestingly there are very few companies that offer connections to social networks, which is a factor that must be considered in the definition of communication strategies and the involvement of its partners, in order to become truly competitive in the digital environment;

Simple information communicating certification and classification assigned by the authorities has not been observed;

In short, the TRC mainly make asynchronous communication resources available but do not provide synchronous online communication (such as Instant Messaging e.g. chat) or the more sophisticated Virtual Assistants version;

As only 40% of the companies provide information on their site in more than one language, this should be a factor for further consideration;

There are few instruments that facilitate the involvement, interaction, and dialogue with *stakeholders*.

It was found that there is a marked imbalance in providing information, communication and interaction and this has contributed towards a relatively inconsistent image of the TRC analysed.

As an overall conclusion, we can say that although the Internet is increasingly considered a powerful tool in the communication and interaction process with *stakeholders* and the websites are an excellent, efficient and effective means communication it would appear that the Tourism Recreation Companies analysed are not apparently using it to its full potential.

### **Limitations and future lines of research**

During the study, we identified a set of limitations that constrain the analysis and the respective results, which we will address.

Firstly, we can refer to the use of an unsophisticated analytical tool, while having the advantage of ease of implementation that we consider to be an important and streamlined method of, strategic organization information. However, the use of more sophisticated statistic analysis methods could potentiate data evaluation analysis in various dimensions that are not just descriptive analyses.

Another factor is the subjectivity of the data. This feature can be considered as one of the main limitations of the study, although some recent studies which have used the same analysis tools have had to deal with this limitation. Data analysis also shows a degree of subjectivity, since the study is based on an analysis of perceptions of the researchers.

Also the use of a binary scale in measuring the items does not eliminate the need to assign a weighting to each item depending on its relevance. The sample is reduced, as the time horizon for research was limited.

After identifying some aspects limiting the present study, we have developed a set of proposals for possible future research. Thus, it would be interesting and appropriate to carry out a specific analysis of each group of items and other indicators, as well as studying different activities related to the tourism industry.

Taking into consideration that it was opted to prepare a pilot study with a sample of the population, based solely on associative factors, it would be appropriate to expand the scope of the study and use all the organization's data for future in-depth research.

It would also be appropriate to extend the time horizon, in order to perform an analysis of the evolution of the corporate websites studied, and to verify how the dissemination of marketing communications enables effective growth activity of the entities as well as promotes effective behavioural change in interaction with its various stakeholders.

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