Destination Image on the Web: Evaluation of Pernambuco’s Official Tourism Destination Websites
Salomão Alencar de Farias*1, Edvan Cruz Aguiar*2, Michelle Helena Kovacs*3 and Francisco Vicente Sales Melo*4

Abstract
The main objective of this article is to analyze the destination image construct. More specifically on how the destination website, as a virtual place where the potential tourist can experience some attributes of the tourism service, search for information and get to know a place in a better way, may influence a destination image. To do so first is presented a literature review on destination image, how this construct relates to the use of websites and how it has been measured. Secondly, a case in Brazil was investigated: the state of Pernambuco official websites. The results indicated that the websites combine, not in a well balanced way, both functional and aesthetics characteristics. Destinations compete globally and the web seems to be the most effective instrument to target a broad audience without boundaries. The case here studied, the destination websites from Pernambuco, Brazil, offers the possibility to envision a way to understand how a website can contribute to the image construction or positioning. This paper shows a methodology that can be applied to different websites as a way to evaluate their effectiveness and to a better site design with the balance of functional and aesthetics components.

Key words: Pernambuco, Image. Tourist destinations, Websites, Tourism, Brazil

INTRODUCTION
Tourism is one of the sectors that offer the most significant contribution to the economic development of countries. Provides income and jobs to a region, while impacting different related industries (Martin et al. 2007, p. 263). Destinations consist of the location where the tourists choose to go, they compete globally. To be successful a destination must have a unique image on the minds of consumers. Images are mental interpretation from reality that can be considered a continuum from reality to imaginary. This way, image is a subjective concept and depends a lot on personal interpretation. Destination image can be created by using different forms of communication. Gallarza et al. (2002, p. 56) affirm that “the importance of the tourist destination’s image is universally acknowledged, it affects the individual’s subjective perception and consequent behavior and destination choice”.

The main objective of this article is to analyze the destination image construct. More specifically on how the destination website, as a virtual place where the potential tourist can experience some attributes of the tourism service, search for information and get to know a place in a better way, may influence a destination image. To do so first is presented a literature review on destination image, how this construct relates to the use of websites and how it has been measured. Secondly, a case in Brazil was investigated: the state of Pernambuco official websites. Therefore, this paper uses a combination of structured and unstructured methodologies applied to this specific location. Primary, four official websites related to the state and some of their destinations were evaluated by a group of judges using previous defined attributes. The objective was to evaluate how the website is presenting an image of the location. Then, a web survey was conducted with the use of a questionnaire, aiming to find out how the consumer perceives the location, scoring some attributes common to a tourist destination.

The results indicated that the websites combine, not in a well balanced way, both functional and aesthetics characteristics. Also, the theme presented at the strategic plan for the case here investigated, that wants to present Pernambuco as a destination for beaches, sun, culinary and culture, are not always

* Universidade Federal de Pernambuco (UFPE), Brasil
1 saf@ufpe.br
2 edvan.ed@gmail.com
3 michellekovacs@gmail.com
4 vicsmelo@gmail.com

©Society for Business and Management Dynamics
portrayed in a consistent way among the four websites. Consumers do think about Pernambuco as a place where they can find nice beaches, sun, culture and good food, a hypothesis that other sources of information besides the websites are contributing to form an image of Pernambuco in their minds. Overall, the visitation of the website brought to a positive evaluation of the state as a tourist destination, besides some negative aspects as urban violence and shark attacks at some beaches in Recife (the capital of this state). Finally limitations are presented and also suggestions for future research.

DESTINATION IMAGE CONCEPTUALIZATION
Tourism products are experiential in nature, and share the characteristics of services. Tourism services are intangible and image is an important aspect, “generally based on attributes, functional or expected benefits, and the symbolic meaning or psychological aspects associate with a specific destination” (Govers and Go, 2003, p. 15). The image influences destination positioning and tourist’s buying behavior. Being a service, the tourism product (as a destination), presents an active participation of the consumer on the operation and also creating meaning to the event. This way, destination image is by definition, a consumer-oriented concept. The construction of an image was described by Reynolds (1965) as the development of a mental construct taking in account some impressions chosen from a group of information. Hunt (1975) defines destination image as the perceptions held by potential visitors about an area. Martineau (1958) presented the concept of store personality, related to the store image, implying that like a human being, a store has some traits showing a personality or an image, and this can be extended to a tourism destination.

This way, destination image should be seen as having two main components: those that are attribute based and those that are holistic. Each of these components contains functional (tangible) and psychological (abstract) characteristics. Images of destinations can also “range from those based on ‘common’ functional and psychological traits to those based on more distinctive or even unique features, events, feelings or auras” (Govers and Go, 2003, p. 15). Loda et al. (2009) argue that inspiration, usability and credibility perceptions show significant evidence to impact on a destination website’s persuasiveness. To help with the website credibility, they point out that presenting institutional or individual credentials, quality rating awards, “links to other credible websites and using a URL suffix denoting an educational, nonprofit or governmental designation, are recommended actions” (Loda et al. (2009, p. 71-72).

According to Hosany et al. (2006, p.638) “studies on destination image began in the early 1970s. Destination image is defined as an attitudinal concept consisting on the sum of beliefs, ideas and impressions that a tourist holds of a destination”. Destination image is a multidimensional construct formed by two primary variables: cognitive and affective. The cognitive component relates to “beliefs and knowledge of the physical attributes of a destination, and the affective component refers to the appraisal of the affective quality of feelings towards the attributes and the surrounding environments” (Hosany et al., 2006, p.639).

Destination image has a paramount role in a person’s travel purchase related to decisions making and customer’s satisfaction with a travel purchase largely “depends on a comparison of his expectation about destination, or a previously held destination image, and his perceived performance of the destination” (Pike, 2002, p. 541).

Tasci and Gartner (2007, p.403) stress the importance of proper image development to the overall success of a destination in tourism. This way, marketing related aspects such as position and promotion in charge of the supply side of the tourism industry are important variables to the proper image formation. They say that the “ultimate goal of a destination in conducting marketing is to attract tourists by influencing their travel decision making choice”.

Gallarza et al. (2002, p. 56) agree that “the importance of the tourist destination’s image is universally acknowledge, since it affect the individual’s subjective perception and consequent behavior and destination choice”. Tourism destination products are complex and multidimensional. “In tourism, images are more important than tangible resources, perceptions are what motivate consumers to behave” (Gallarza et al., 2002, p. 57). Tourism destinations are central elements of the tourism system. Primary features of tourism destinations include climate, ecology, culture and traditional architecture, while
secondary features are those developments introduced specifically for tourism such as hotels, catering, transport and entertainment (Kozak and Rimmington, 1999, p. 274).

Gartner (1993) address a relevant point, destination image becomes an important component of destination selection as soon as an individual decides to travel. This author considers that destination images are formed by three different but “hierarchically interrelated components: cognitive, affective and conative” (p.193). The cognitive image variable consists of an evaluation of the “known attributes or the understanding of the destination in an intellectual way”. It is important to point that “due to the inability to pretest the tourist product, touristic images will often be based more on perceptions than reality” (p. 196). The affective variable motivates the destination chosen. Finally, the conative image component corresponds to the individual behavior, meaning the action component, the ultimate choosing a specific destination.

Besides that, destination images are either of primary or secondary nature, according to the information source used by an individual to evaluate a specific tourism destination. “Secondary images are formed from information received from some external source and primary image are formed through visitation” (Gartner, 1993, p. 196).

Gartner (1993) proposes the existence of image formation agents, consisting on overt and covert induced and autonomous. Overt induced agents are twofold: 1) consist of traditional forms of advertising, that are intended to reach large amounts of people; and b) consist of information received or requested from tour operators and organizations not directly associated with a particular destination area (p. 198 -199). Covert induced are also twofold: 1) use of a spokesperson with credibility to attract attention and endorse destination; 2) information is offered by “a person who does not appear to have any connection with the destination, except through prior visitation, increasing source credibility” (p. 201). Finally, autonomous image formation agents “consist of independently produced reports, documentaries, movies and new articles” (p. 201), and blogs and virtual social networks (with the use of internet). This latter one, reminds us of the importance of the web on the image construction process nowadays.

Besides the agents presented in the previous paragraph, Gartner (1993) adds “unsolicited organic” agents, that consist of information received “from individuals who have been to an area, or believe they know what exist there” (p. 203). “Solicited organic” agents are friends and relatives (p. 204) and “organic” information is the one acquired about a destination “based on previous travel to area”, and presents the “highest credibility as it is based on personal experience” (p. 205).

Martin et al. (2007, p.263-264) calls the attention to the fact that “given its relevance, destination image is one of the most explored fields in tourism research”. “Terms such as impression, perception or mental representations of a tourism destination are generally used in order to conceptualize destination image”. The authors point out that considering destination image is a subjective concept, the reality can be very different from its image, as perceived by the individual.

Finally, it is possible to assume that destination image is on the mind of consumers, it is based on attitudes towards a location, can be biased by different sources (agents), and it is a complex construct, that can only be captured by a combination of different methodologies, both qualitative and quantitative. The next topic discusses the application of this construct in the virtual area.

DESTINATION IMAGE AND WEBSITE USAGE

Destinations are regarded as well-defined geographical areas, such as a country, island, state or a town. To promote an area, destination marketing organization (such as governmental tourism authority) needs to present an integrated destination product that encompasses all tourist attractions and services provided by a location. Considering the intangibility of the tourism product, meaning that a destination cannot be physically inspected or displayed at the point of sale, that is a characteristic of services, and therefore is almost entirely dependent upon representations and descriptions to help tourists make a purchase decision. The desired image is pictured to offer a potential customer enough information and emotion to support the decision making during the purchasing process. Thus, “the availability of up-to-date, accurate, attractive, and accessible information is regarded as crucial for the success of a destination product. A website is the most advanced medium to address such a need” (Beldona and Cai, 2006, p.70-71).
According to Choi et al. (2007, p. 60) “travel decisions involve a variety of search behaviors, and travelers have access to numerous and varied information sources to aid their trip planning”. With the advance of the internet as a credible tool and source of information, individuals can use this end to search information about tourism destinations. Actually, one relevant market communication channel in current time is the internet, considering the impact of information technology on the tourism industry. “New information technologies have provided travel organizations (public and private) speedy and efficient delivery of comprehensive information”, without boundaries (Choi et al. 2007, p. 59).

According to Dooling et al. (2002, p. 557), tourism is an unusual product; it exists only as information at the point of sale, and cannot be sampled before the purchase decision is made. Therefore, the nature of the tourism product is information-based, and the internet through the web offers global reach and multimedia capability. Internet has an increasing role as means of promoting and distributing tourism services, and presenting a virtual image to be sampled before the actual travel to a destination, can support to reduce the perceived risk of making a wrong choice (Yusta et al., 2008).

Moving from simply broadcasting information to allowing consumers to interact with the web site content may led to a behavior of greater interest and participation to capture information about their preferences related to tourism destinations. The content of tourism destination websites is particularly important because it influences directly on the perceived image of the destination and creates a virtual experience for the consumer that is increased when interactivity is made present (Dooling et al., 2002, p. 557).

Loda et al. (2009, p. 70) indicates that as people increasingly use the internet for destination information, tourism providers need to understand how to maximize the persuasiveness of their websites. The website design (physical appearance, color, layout, graphics), interface and ease of use (functionality, usability, efficiency and reliability), including menus to organize information, can enhance the credibility of a website. Credibility, “the judgments made by a perceiver, is a key component of persuasiveness communication in general” (Loda et al., 2009, p. 71). Intangible, expensive purchases on services such as travel involves both financial and emotional risks. The credibility of a source tends to have the most crucial influence on the selection and use of it.

Morrison et al. (2004, p.233) informs that in the 90s researchers struggled to understand the web and the individuals who were using it for travel information. In a virtual world, tourism destinations and tourism organizations had a new way to show themselves to their public as well as to manage their image through the internet. “Website development without much thought given to their effectiveness in meeting specific organizational objectives”, can be worthless. This way, the evaluation of website effectiveness is needed considering its costs of maintenance and development. The authors say that “website evaluations are required to facilitate continuous improvements as well as to judge the site performance against competitors and industry peers” (Morrison et al., 2004, p. 234).

Online technologies redefined the relationships among tourism players such as individuals, companies and travel agents. Web-based technologies are facilitating tourists to access useful and up to date information about a destination (Lu, 2002). Tourism destination websites are a window to portrait a desirable image of a country, state, city or specific tourism attraction.

“Internet is believed to enhance information processing and consumer decision-making by providing the right information” (Choi et al., 2007, p.62). However, a website does not just serve as an informative tool. Its many features and capabilities allows a business to actually market a product, and effectively so, as it is able to target and draw customers through unique expressions to the destination product. It can initiate key emotions and feelings that would eventually enable the purchase decision. “What differentiates a destination website from others is that when a traveler makes a purchase decision of a destination product, he or she is looking at the total experience that will be derived from the interdependent functions of many supplementary product and service providers and value adders at multiple levels” (Beldona and Cai, 2006, p. 71). Official destination website is the central point from which it directs online visitors to attractions and other providers and value adders such as hotels and restaurant.

O’Connor (2004) claims that the development of the web has changed the way in which travel goods and services are being marked to the consumers, and undoubtedly design affects a website’s success. Good design calls for balancing two interrelated and conflicting elements: presentation and usability. “The
topic of web design is complex and at its broad level can be thought of as including elements of content, information architecture, graphic design, search strategy, navigability and usability” (p. 226). Presentation and usability are related to two schools of web design – aesthetic school and functional school. The first argues for the graphical design, aesthetic and entertainment aspects of Web design, while the second focus more on content and function. The aesthetic school of web design bases on the fact that good graphical design enhances content and adds value. “The web sites that use more advanced web technology and multimedia in an effort to create an experience for its product and company are known as branded-style sites. The emphasis is on how the page looks rather the information it contains or how the user will interact with it. A stronger focus on aesthetics aspects as a result of increased used of images and icons and a strong orientation towards graphical feature”, is a characteristic of this school (O’Connor, 2004, p. 227). The same author mentions that the functional school of web design “places emphasis on usability and navigability rather than on aesthetics. Website should provide easy and well-ordered access to information to all possible users rather than present fancy graphics or multimedia” (p. 227). Good design should direct consumers towards information rather than distract them, and this approach tends to ignore “beauty and finesse”. A reason for this is that usability is an important issue, and users tend to abandon a site when usability is not present. It seems that a balanced approach is a better path. Pure functional approach may not be appropriate for travel and tourism website, a combination of text and pictures is more effective when selling a tourism product. The challenge here is to find the right balance between functionality and aesthetics in designing a destination website. One thing must be stressed: websites are important tools to promote a destination and a way to manage a location image, especially among young travelers that were born in the new technology era, the information era, and spend many hours on the virtual world, looking for information, chatting, socializing and purchasing.

DESTINATION IMAGE MEASUREMENT

Driscoll et al. (1994) indicate that tourism researchers face decisions of selecting appropriate data collection instruments, and this “involves utilizing suitable research methods, scaling techniques, and response formats” (p. 499). The problem of accurate measurement is not a new one. However, “little is known empirically about the effects of various response formats, in measuring destination image, particularly on reliability and validity estimates” (Driscoll et al., 1994, p. 500). Destination image researchers have employed semantic differential scale, Likert-type scales, or graphic positioning scales. The most common format is referred as a scaled questionnaire, and requires respondents to separately rate each destination on the basis of a set of benefit generating attributes. The scaled questionnaire “invites the respondent to look across the whole range of attributes for each destination and intuitively places the emphasis on the destination” (Driscoll et al., 1994, p.500-501). Kozak and Rimmington (1999, p. 275) conducted a research related to destination competitiveness and they present an opinion that this construct can be evaluated both quantitatively and qualitatively. The first is data as tourist arrivals and tourist income, and the second is the positive or negative view of the destination. Govers et al. (2007, p. 977-978) comment that with the proliferation of the internet, “its convergence with and influence on the de-massification of the media, tourism destination image are becoming increasingly fragmented and ephemeral in nature”. These authors affirm that “image formation is no longer a one-way “push” process of mass communication, but the dynamic one of selecting, reflecting, sharing, and experiencing”. Taking this in account, they propose the use of unstructured instruments followed by content analysis. More specifically, their paper deals with “phenomenographic approach to measure image, including the subjective view of the individual, and it is defined as a study of how we experience, conceptualize, understand, perceive, apprehend various phenomena, being related to phenomenology”. (Govers et al. 2007, p. 980). The main aspect of phenomenographic is the concern with eliciting the individual’s construction of social reality.

In retail store image research, “the use of scales has been long criticized considering that individuals are encouraged to respond to prescribed attributes that do not necessarily comprise the image they have of
the store being studied” (Govers et al., 2007, p.980). Assuming that tourism is an experiential product, a qualitative perspective seems to be more adequate to capture destination image. Morrison et al. (2004, p.242) used balanced scored card technique to evaluate tourism websites, arguing for the need to develop more “standardized approaches and measurement criteria for tourism and hospitality websites”. They claim that the use of standardized instrument criteria, and measures will bring sector-to-sector comparisons. They also present in their paper a summary of nineteen website evaluation studies where the method applied was content analysis, stressing that qualitative approaches are in use for website evaluation.

Balanced scored card is a set of carefully selected measures originating from the organization’s vision and strategy. It is a tool that translates the mission and strategy into comprehensive set of performance measures “that provide the framework for a strategic measurement and management system” (Morrison et al. 2004, p. 235).

Echtner and Ritchie (2003, p. 45) indicate that researchers have a strong preference for structured methodologies when measuring destination image, “focusing on the common, attribute based component of destination image, not addressing the holistic and unique components” of a location. They say there is a need to the use of unstructured methodologies. It is what Martin et al. (2008, p.267) call the combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches, since this combination tends to “increase the quality, accuracy, validity and reliability of the data”.

The reviewed literature for the construction indicated on the predominance of attribute measurement applying questionnaires and website content analysis as a way to measure website destination image and performance. Clearly there is not a unique point of view for the best way to capture destination image. A combination of methodologies seems to be the correct choice.

METHODOLOGY

A combination of qualitative and quantitative approach was adopted in this research. Based on Morrison et al. (2004) study, they presented a list of dimensions and attributes to evaluate tourism and hospitality websites, it was built a list of variables that were used to evaluate the official destination websites of Pernambuco State (www.ipernambuco.com.br; www.peconhecepe.com.br, www.visiteportodegalinhas.com.br; www.noronha.pe.gov.br). For that, content analysis was applied, considering the previous dimensions found on the literature review. This way, each website was seen based on previous defined dimensions for the content analysis.

The dimensions here considered for the evaluation of the website content were: user friendliness, site attractiveness, marketing effectiveness, link popularity (as indicated at www.linkpopularity.com), trip planner assistance, and legal compliance (Morrison et al. 2004). The websites were evaluated by a group of judges. In this study the experts were two doctoral candidates, a marketing professor, two tourism professors and three undergraduate students with proper training on the subject of the research. Each person was given a sheet with the items adapted from Morrison et al. (2004) and asked to visit each site and fill out the form according to how they perceived each specified dimension/attribute. According to Kassarjian (1977, p. 10), content analysis is a scientific, objective, systematic, quantitative, and generalizable description of communication content. After individual assessment, the researchers gathered for a face validation procedure. From a systematic analysis, the data was compared to check both discrepancy and agreement on the dimensions. Results were discussed until a consensus was achieved on conflicting items. The joint assessment with similar conclusions of the researchers and the analysis results were presented and discussed in group discussions.

The procedures here adopted for the content analysis are the ones recommended by Kassarjian (1977). First, there was the issue of sampling, where the four websites of Pernambuco state are part of the communication data for analysis. The unit of measurement was the theme, since issues and attitudes are usually discussed in this form of unit for content analysis. The categories are the conceptual scheme of the research and were proposed by Morrison et al. (2004) as already mentioned. Reliability was assessed by interjudge reliability (Kassarjian, 1977, p. 14), considering the percentage of agreement on the evaluation of the websites based on the categories previously defined, and it accounted for more than 85% of concordance, “and researchers can be quite satisfied with that index”. Validity was assessed based on...
literature review considering that the categories here used measures what they intend to do: destination image.

A second step was the online application of a structured questionnaire using the ‘survey monkey’ tool (www.surveymonkey.com). The questionnaire was structured (based on Moura, 2008; Echtner et al., 1993, 2003), but at the same time presented some open-ended questions, as recommended by Echtner and Ritchie (2008). The survey took place during two months in 2009 (October and November), in the sense that e-mails were sent to a list specially built for this research, using them as source of present information on the annals of the Brazilian Academy of Management Meeting (ANPAD) and Anpad Marketing Meeting (EMA). More than one thousand e-mails were submitted asking the subjects to click in a link that would lead them to the survey website where the questionnaire was available with instructions. A total of 106 valid questionnaires (about 10% response rate) was obtained and used in the analysis of the website attributes, where it was used the distribution measure. The general sites related to the state of Pernambuco were considered for this last analysis: ‘peconhecepe’ and ‘ipernambuco’. The next topic presents the analysis of the data.

ANALYSIS

The analysis is presented in two parts: first the website content is discussed along with the open-ended questions captured at the online survey related to the image of the state of Pernambuco, prior to the respondents’ website visitation. According to official information (SETUR, 2010), ‘Pernambuco to the world’ strategic plan positions the state based on beaches, sun, gastronomy and culture. The expectation when the plan was launched in 2008 was that Pernambuco would receive 4,56 million of tourists in 2010, with 354 thousand being international tourists.

To evaluate the destination website as proposed by Morrison et al. (2004), a rating scale was used. The scale reads: ‘not present = 0, Poor = 1, Fair = 2, Good = 3, Excellent = 4’, considering if the attribute is present and if so, how experts would evaluate them, as showed on the website. Most of the times, there was an agreement among judges, and discrepancy accounted for about 10% of the items, based on their visits to the websites listed above.

The first dimension to be evaluated was ‘user friendliness’ for PG (www.visiteportodegalinhas.com.br), PCP (www.peconhecepernambuco.com.br), IP (www.ipernambuco.com.br) and FN (www.noronha.pe.gov.br). A picture of the websites main page is presented at the end of this paper and also a detailed list of the dimensions and attributes used on the analysis. Even though three of the websites use the “.com.br” suffix, all of them are governmental owned websites.

Related to user friendliness ‘peconhecepe’ was the website with the most friendly platform and ease of contact. Its confirmed that online technologies redefined the relationships among tourism players such as individuals, companies and travel agents and Website should provide easy and well ordered access to information for all possible users rather than present fancy graphics or multimedia” (O’Connor, 2004, p. 227). Marketing effectiveness that deals with information, market segmentation, tangibilizing of products, customer services and globalization among other aspects, had the highest score with Fernando de Noronha website (see table 1).

Link popularity was evaluated based on the ‘linkpopularity’ website information. This site demonstrates how many links are available on the web that has something to do with the website address being analyzed. Fernando de Noronha is the most popular website. This was expected since this island is a well known tourist destination in Brazil, considered a ‘paradise’ for tourists. In other words, destination image is defined as an attitudinal concept consisting on the sum of beliefs, ideas and impressions that a tourist holds of a destination, being the cognitive component relates to beliefs and knowledge of the physical attributes of a destination, and the affective component refers to the appraisal of the affective quality of feelings towards the attributes and the surrounding environments (Hosany et al.,2006, p.639). Also, being an environmental protected area, it is often in the news, which could have contributed to its popularity on the web.

Trip planner assistance dimension is better pictured at Porto de Galinhas website. The website provides many clues and things to do at the village, including dining, scuba diving, and shopping. According to Lu (2002, p. 192), web-based technologies are facilitating tourists to access useful and up to date
information about a destination and the tourism destination websites are a window to portray a desirable image of a country, state, city or specific tourism attraction. Finally, legal compliance is weak in all sites. It seems there are no concerns about legal issues, copyrights and privacy policy.

As shown in table 1, the site that had the best evaluation considering the total points at the dimensions and attributes proposed by Morrison et al. (2004) for destination website evaluation is ‘www.visiteportodegalinhas.com.br’. Porto de Galinhas is a well known destination in Brazil and the site targets foreign and Brazilian tourists, and has both functionality and aesthetics characteristics, not always well balanced though. The site is maintained by the secretary of tourism from the city of Ipojuca. Interestingly it has no link to the state of Pernambuco main tourist website (ipernambuco). Being an important tourist destination for the state, an effort should be done to search synergy among the four websites here in the analysis.

Considering that the state tourism secretary has a strategic plan for the whole state, with a vision for the tourism in Pernambuco, integrating the websites would be something expected to happen. Being independent from the state tourism authority, Porto de Galinhas’ website seemed to be more dynamic and up to date when compared to others on this analysis.

None of the websites use the whole space on the webpage to portrait the destination. The site is concentrated in the center of the page, and new monitors with wide screen technology do not take advantage of a bigger and improved image of pictures and videos presented as part of the aesthetic effort to bring an experience to the consumer about the destination, which could had been better worked whereas that the content of tourism destination websites is particularly important because it influences directly on the perceived image of the destination and creates a virtual experience for the consumer that is increased when interactivity is made present (Dooling et al., 2002). As people increasingly use the internet for destination information, tourism providers needs to understand how to maximize the persuasiveness of their websites.

The attributes here presented are interesting for the evaluation of destination websites, so that the governmental tourist authority can have some parameters for the site effectiveness, but are not the only ones found on the literature. Considering that Pernambuco’s strategic tourism plan focus its positioning on beaches, sun, gastronomy and culture, those elements should be part of the websites as constant and explicit themes throughout all four official websites, but website evaluations are needed to facilitate continuous improvements as well as to judge site performance against competitors and industry peers and to restructure the site as the needs of the target (Morrison et al., 2006). A conjunct action should be applied for a better result. Most recently, Recife beaches were on the news because shark attacks took place in the early 90s and nothing related to this is presented on the websites. The low popularity on the majority of the sites implies the need for a improved effort to work internet search tools to improve the disclosure of the websites among internet surfers searching for information about Pernambuco and its attractions. In a virtual world, tourism destinations and tourism organizations have to find a new way to show themselves to their public as well as to manage their image throughout the internet.

A general qualitative evaluation based on the impressions of the experts (judges) about the sites is presented following:

Porto de Galinhas (PG): Overall, this is the most complete site of the Pernambuco state. It has lots of information (functionality) for the tourists and also images and videos related to the destination. Interactivity is low, and the participation of the tourist on the site elaboration is basically zero. The use of colors, image and icons is present on the site (figure 1). The size of the letter used to present the information is small and there is a tool to make it bigger. It is the only site with information about visa for foreign tourists. The site is available in English and Spanish, besides Portuguese. The site is more functional than aesthetic, but it does give some idea of what to expect in the village (beach) with the pictures available. According to O’Connor (2004), the challenge for the tourism web sites is to find the right balance between functionality and aesthetics in designing a destination website and pure functional approach may not be appropriate for travel and tourism website. A combination of text and pictures is more effective when selling the tourism product. Page space does not cover all the space on the monitor screen. An icon appears stating that the beach was voted as one of the best in Brazil in 2009. The image is of sun, gastronomy, and warm waters.
Pernambuco Conhece Pernambuco (PCP): This is the newest project from the tourism state authority. It is meant for the residents of the state as a way to stimulate internal tourism (figure 2). The site is only available in Portuguese. Many of the links contains errors, the information is not up to date, and information such as maps and virtual tour are not available or judges could not find it. The site stress more it aesthetic side than the functional one. The use of colors (blue) on the background and lots of pictures, makes it attractive at a first glance. Functionality is low, and since it has a link on the IPernambuco website, it should also focus on international tourists, offering the options to see it in English and Spanish. O’Connor (2004) claims that the development of the web has changed the way in which travel goods and services are being marketed to the consumers, and undoubtedly design, functionality, usability and interactivity affects a website’s success.

IPernambuco: This website is the main one for the state of Pernambuco (figure 3). The site present links for accessing it both in English and Spanish. Information presented on the site is not all up to date. The site can be considered complete, in the sense that if offers links for lots of information about the state and its cities, and even a link to the website ‘peconhecepe’. The multimedia is present as a link but it was not working during the evaluation. Aesthetically the site is attractive, and the functionality is good. Some important information are missing such as: necessary documents for international tourists, health concerns, city maps, etc. Quality of the pictures and color combination are professional making it nice to navigate. This finding corroborates to Govers et al. (2007), that affirm the image formation is no longer a one-way ‘push’ process of mass communication, but the dynamic one of selecting, reflecting, sharing, and experiencing.

Fernando de Noronha (FN): The site is very basic with low aesthetic appeal and more functional tools (figure 4). It gives the feeling of clutter pages. Some of the links present problems taking the individual to blank pages. Information is old. An important aspect is that the essential information related to rotes and tips about the island are present. Pictures and a link to a live cam are available, but this last one is not working. Considering that the island is protected by the government, a link for education related to environmental issues is given to the tourist. This is the only website that uses the suffix gov.br. Considering the attractiveness of the destination, it seems that the website is not ‘willing to attract more tourists’, but only informing the individuals that already know the island through the media or word-of-mouth. Based on this description, it is important note that the websites are important tools to promote a destination and a way to manage a location image, especially among young travelers that were born in the new technology era, the information era, and spend many hours on the virtual world, looking for information, chatting, socializing and buying. Then, all attention should be given to tourist destination websites that wish to attract your audience through an image that is formed with the site.

The strategic tourism plan of Pernambuco states that: Tourist destinations – cities, regions or countries – rely heavily on their image and perceived image created, and the promotion provided about the location. The whole process of consolidation and maintenance of a destination in the competitive tourism market, both domestically and internationally, depends on the actions taken accordingly. The way in which destinations are promoted - alone, together with others, only as minor components of the state - also greatly influence the vision of the consuming public about the destinations and therefore should be carefully defined (SETUR, 2010). One way to promote a destination in current times is through the use of websites. Searching on the web was possible to identify four official websites related to Pernambuco state and some of its destinations that were here considered for analysis.

Also, considering that Recife is one of the most violent cities in Brazil, tips related to tourist security should be provided on the website, as a way to show how public agencies are working to protect tourist and change this reality. The problems of the state capital are known worldwide due to information available in travel guides and on the web. It is a sensitive topic that needs to be addressed in a positive way, showing information to avoid this to negatively impact potential tourists on not wanting to come to the state.

One thing that calls the attention is that none of the websites targets specific groups as elderly consumers, gays, families, honeymooners, etc. If the state tourism authority had worked with the tourism chain in the state in the sense of developing special products for those segments, it could have built a differential for the destination. As an example, Rio de Janeiro city website (www.riodejaneiro-turismo.com.br) explicitly
targets gay tourists with the slogan “Rio the best gay destination”, offering links with specific information for this public.

The questionnaire had three open ended questions at the beginning. The first questions asked about “what comes to your mind when you think of Pernambuco as a tourism destination”. It was possible to identify that respondents indicated “beaches, Porto de Galinhas, Culture (including frevo, that is a typical dance), sun (summer, warm weather), Olinda (a city that is a historical patrimony of the world) and Recife (the capital). Then, respondents were asked “how would they describe what to expect when visiting Pernambuco”, and the answers were: local culture, beaches (sun, warm weather), fun (entertainment), nature, gastronomy, hospitality. The last question asked respondents to mention the main tourism attraction they could remember related to Pernambuco, and answers were: Porto de Galinhas, Olinda and Recife (the old part of Recife). It is possible to identify most of the points here mentioned by respondents are present at the official websites. This way, the sites are portraying what the tourists have in mind about Pernambuco as a tourist destination.

The second part of the survey corresponded to a list of 38 attributes based on the questionnaire used by Moura (2008), based on Echtner et al. (1993, 2003). The scale used was a Likert-type and consisted of 5 points (1 totally disagree and 5 completely agree). Due to the limitation on the number of pages we are only commenting on the items with higher scores. Close to 62% of the 106 respondents have been before to Pernambuco. After visiting Pernambuco’s tourism websites (Ipernambuco and Peconhecepe), 77% affirms that Pernambuco has an amazing scenario, and that they can find an interesting culinary. Related to the climate, 75% believe that it offers a nice weather. About the architecture, 74% agreed that Pernambuco has lots of historical buildings. The local population was considered friendly by 69% of the respondents and 93% that the state offers natural amazing scenarios. Interestingly, only 64% believed that there are good beaches for swimming (this number is not higher probably due to shark attacks in beaches located in Recife).

When asked if Pernambuco is a fascination destination, only 20% agreed with this affirmation while 74% indicated that local festivities are easy to see and experience. Respondents profile consists of 86% with graduate level of education and monthly income averaging R$4,000.00 (32%). Overall, image that respondents had about Pernambuco after seeing both websites was positive, based on the scores obtained on the evaluated attributes.

Based on this analysis, it is possible to say that the websites are creating a positive image on the sample here used. At the same time, as pointed on the literature, previous experience can also contribute for the image formation, and more than 60% of the respondents have been to Pernambuco before. So, the real effect of the website is not clear on this point.

CONCLUSION

It is clear the need for websites to better exploit the interactive capabilities of the internet to capture tourist imagination in the travel purchase decision making (Beldona and Cai, 2006). Destination image is an important construct on the tourism literature and even though the first papers dealing with this theme goes back on the 70s, specially with Hunt’s (1975) seminal work, it is still a topic in need for more academic research. The advent of internet and the Web brings the possibility of presenting a destination image to the world with relative low costs. Destinations compete globally and the web seems to be the most effective instrument to target a broad audience without boundaries. The case here studied, the destination websites from Pernambuco, Brazil, offers the possibility to envision a way to understand how a website can contribute to the image construction or positioning. This paper shows a methodology that can be applied to different websites as a way to evaluate their effectiveness and to a better site design with the balance of functional and aesthetics components. Also, it was possible to affirm that the website here evaluated does not present interactivity and are also not using all the potentials that the current technology offers to web designers. The first objective was to review the literature on destination image, and then analyze its application on the web and how this construct should be measured. It was found that a combination of structured and unstructured methodologies seems to be the best way, since destination image is a subjective construct that heavily depends on the tourist interpretation. So, even
thought it was investigate a specific case (the state of Pernambuco official destination websites), the methodology here applied can be used with any other destination.

This paper contribution is twofold: in the academic side it reviews the literature on destination image, how to measure it and the use of websites as a way to present and manage an image. So, for those researchers interested in studying this theme, they can find here some relevant theoretical information, but due to the restrictions of pages that a paper has, it is not possible to present an exhaustive or complete literature review. Second, the paper has practical implications. It presents methodological procedures to evaluate the destination website and its effectiveness in portraying an image. It shows the necessity for both unstructured and structured procedures for a better result in analyzing destination websites, at the same time that stresses the needs for the destination tourism organizations to keep a close eye on the websites under their responsibility, identifying if the image pretended on a strategic plan, for instance, is being perceived as desire by the audience. Also, findings suggest the need for websites to better explore the interactive capabilities as a way to capture individuals imagination in the travel destination purchase.

In a virtual world, tourism destinations and tourism organizations had a new way to show themselves to their public as well as to manage their image through the internet. Online technologies are redefining the relationships among tourism players such as individuals, companies and travel agents. In this sense, the challenge here is to find the right balance between functionality and aesthetics in designing a destination website. One point must be stressed: websites are important tools to promote a destination and a way to manage a location image, especially among young travelers that were born in the new technology era, the information era, and spend many hours on the virtual world, looking for information, chatting, socializing and buying.

As any research, this paper has limitations. The use of judges to evaluate the website content presents a subjective view. Also, the use of dimensions proposed by a previous study can limit a better perspective of the attributes a destination has to offer. The survey had a low response rate and investigated only two of the four websites here analyzed. The items used on the questionnaire were not tailor made for the state of Pernambuco. They were adapted from previous research. The analysis made use of basic statistics with the survey data. Also, the non-probabilistic sample used on the survey, is an important limitation for the results.

Finally, future researches could focus on the measurement of the holistic concept of destination image and use cross cultural studies to analyze successful destinations and their websites, as a way to benchmark the main characteristics of destination websites that uses functional and aesthetics features in a balanced and efficient way. International tourists should be the focus of future research to verify if the image they have about Pernambuco is different from the Brazilian tourists. In 2010, Pernambuco’s tourism agency decided to implement changes on their websites, and the ones used for this research are no longer available online. New websites are being designed and the authors expect to have contributed, showing an improved use of this import tool, offering a positive and attractive image of the state to potential tourists.

REFERENCES


ADDITIONAL INFORMATION
The dimensions and its attributes used to evaluate the destination website: Ease of Navigation: Clear and effective navigation tools on each page, Home Button available from all pages, Availability of site map or index, Availability of search engine for website content; Ease of contact: Direct email contact clearly available, Mailing address clearly available, Telephone number clearly available, Fax number clearly available.

©Society for Business and Management Dynamics
available; **Site attractiveness**: Clear and readable text, Clean and uncluttered pages, Sufficient contrast between background and text, Effective and aesthetically appealing background, Availability of pictures to reinforce text content, Other images used to improve aesthetic of the site, Use of color to improve the visual appeal of the site, Too long scrolling pages, Overall appeal of the site, Effective use of web page space; **Marketing Information**: Current and timely information, Separating links page provide detailing all links on the site, Maps and driving directions; **Marketing Research**: Contact information gathered from visitors; **Marketing Products**: Links to hotels and accommodations, Links to restaurants, Links to local attractions and events; **Marketing Segmentation**: Business travelers, Children, etc.; **Marketing Positioning**: Mission and purpose of the organization clearly stated, Stated theme carried throughout the site; **Tangibilizing of Products**: virtual products, Map of city, Testimonials and/or awards posted, Photo gallery, News Releases; **Partnership**: Hyperlinks provided to partner organizations; **Globalization**: Foreign language, special interest sites for foreign; **Customer Service**: Inquires encouraged, FAQ, Guest book; **Trip Planner Assistance**: Getting around, Essential information, Documents needed by international travelers, Local weather information, Local Bank information, Things to do; **Legal Compliance**: Copyright disclaimers, Trademark prominently displayed, Site usage terms, Privacy policy.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1 – Website dimensions evaluation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>User Friendliness</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ease of Navigation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ease of contact</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Site Attractiveness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Marketing Effectiveness</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marketing Information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marketing Research</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marketing Products</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marketing Segmentation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marketing Positioning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tangibilizing of Products</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partnership</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Globalization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Customer Service</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Link Popularity Report (<a href="http://www.linkpopularity.com">www.linkpopularity.com</a>)</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Google</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MSN – Bing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yahoo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trip Planner Assistance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legal Compliance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
FIGURES: Websites analyzed in this study

Figure 1: VisitePortodeGalinhas.com.br

Figure 2: PeConhecePe.com.br

Figure 3: IPernambuco.com.br

Figure 4: www.noronha.pe.gov.br

The author would like to thank the financial support from FACEPE and CNPq agencies on the development of this research.