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Abstract

Website evaluation has been addressed since many years resulting in various approaches and suggestions concerning which dimensions to include and how to proceed. This study compares existing approaches, suggests an extended catalogue of criteria called *eFitness Check-Update* derived from the original *eFitness@Check* and evaluates the performance of 40 websites of tourism destinations in Austria and Switzerland. The *eFitness Check-Update* catalogue consists of 148 criteria assigned to 11 dimensions. *eFitness Check-Update* not only allows benchmarking DMOs on a criterion level but also on a more aggregated dimension level. Among other results show that DMOs are doing well concerning *Trust* and *Services*. *Useful Information* & *Infrastructure* but have room for improvements regarding *Interactivity* and *Legal Aspects*. Furthermore, *Common State*, *Competitive Advantage*, and *Future Potential* Dimensions are revealed, and Austrian and Swiss results are compared.

Keywords: Website evaluation; key success factors; DMO websites; Austria; Switzerland

1 INTRODUCTION

The Internet has become a valuable tool for sales and marketing in tourism (Buhalis, 2003; Buhalis & Law, 2008; Lee & Morrison, 2010). The popularity of this medium is also shown by the rapid increase of web users and the rising amount of online transactions (Law, Qi, & Buhalis, 2009). The Internet is seen as a tool for creating competitive advantage (Lee & Morrison, 2010).

Destination Marketing Organizations (DMOs) have long since recognised related opportunities, as the Internet fits well the information intensive tourism industry. Since the late 1990s there has been a trend towards supplementing traditional ways of marketing and communication of DMOs with websites offering services via the Internet (Burgess, Parish, & Alcock, 2011). "DMO websites assumed the main role of offering persuasive information to tourists, this way diluting the intangibility associated with tourist products." (Morosan, 2008, p. 217). Today, in developed countries a large majority of DMOs offer websites and take advantage of it by providing online information and booking tools, as well as by using it for customer relationship management (CRM) activities.

To assist DMOs in providing high quality and visually appealing websites, tourism research has been dealing with website evaluation since many years. In doing so empirical studies investigated how travellers perceive a certain website with respect to dimensions such as Ease of use, Usability, Navigational Challenge, Trust, Information Quality, Responsiveness, Security/ Privacy, and Visual Appearance (Park & Gretzel, 2007). Website evaluation studies

have also taken into account dimensions such as Enjoyment (e.g., Lin, Wu, & Tsai, 2005) or Interactivity (e.g., McKinney, Yoon, & Zahedi, 2002). Whereas dimensions such as Trust and Usability can be investigated by conducting surveys and asking users about their perception, provided features – called concrete cues (Zeithaml, Parasuraman, & Malhotra, 2000) – need to be analysed by researchers and organisations respectively. In other words, if for instance features offered on various websites should be compared, researchers have to access each website and collect the information based on a catalogue of criteria themselves and cannot do questionnaire based surveys involving users (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Malhotra, 2005).

Various catalogues of criteria have been developed in the past years taking into account lists of criteria and features which might be available on a DMO website (e.g., IFITT & UNWTO, 2005; Hashim, Murphy, & Law, 2007). However, due to technological changes and development such website evaluation frameworks must be updated regularly to account for new features available. This is what the current research aims at. Thus, the contribution of this paper is manifold by: i) revealing dimensions and related website features based on literature and DMO websites; ii) giving empirical insights with respect to the performance of DMOs on a criteria level, on a dimension level, and overall; iii) grouping dimensions based on the performance level of DMO websites; and iv) comparing the website performance of Austrian and Swiss DMOs.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

Although extensive literature has been published over the past 20 years, website evaluation in tourism is still in its early stages of development (Morrison, Taylor, & Douglas, 2004). According to Law, Shanshan, and Buhalis (2010) there is no universally accepted definition of website evaluation in research so far. However, the authors point to the US Department of Health and Human Services (2006, p. 297) that broadly defines website evaluation as "the act of determining a correct and comprehensive set of user requirements, ensuring that a website provides useful content that meets user expectations and setting usability goals".

Morrison, Taylor, and Douglas (2004) regard website benchmarking as a major website evaluation approach in future research. They suggest a Balanced Scorecard method making it easier for website suppliers to compare their own website performance with the one of best practice examples from the industry and further competitors.

Recently, Law, Shanshan, and Buhalis (2010) proposed a clear distinction between quantitative and qualitative website evaluation studies. From their in-depth review of literature regarding website evaluation from 1996 to 2009, the authors conclude that basically five methods exist to evaluate a tourism website: the counting method, the automated method, the numerical computation method, the user-judgment method, and finally the combined method.

In terms of quantitative/ counting approaches, a number of authors have developed evaluation frameworks: In 2005, a comprehensive practical framework for website evaluation was published by the International Federation for Information Technology and Travel & Tourism (IFITT) in cooperation with the UNWTO (2005). This publication called "Evaluating and Improving Websites – The Destination Web Watch" considers the dimensions Accessibility & Readability, Identity & Trust, Customization & Interactivity, Navigation, Findability & Search Engine Optimization, and Technical Performance. Hashim, Murphy, and Law (2007) focused on website design frameworks and developed five dimensions including Information & Process, Value Added, Relationships, Trust, and Usability. The five dimensions were

developed using the most relevant online attributes revealed through a literature review of tourism and hospitality website studies published between 1997 and 2005.

Furthermore, there is the 6A concept (Buhalis, 2003), the Internet Marketing Star (Benckendorff & Black, 2000), the AIDA model (ITZ, 2003), and 2QCV3Q (Mich, Franch, Cilione, & Marzani, 2003) which also provide guidelines pertaining to which content and features should be provided on DMO websites.

Park and Gretzel (2007) carried out a meta-analysis comparing key success factors suggested in the majority of website evaluation studies; they took into account publications from 1997 until 2006. Based on the results of this meta-analysis, they developed a unified framework of nine success factors comprising Ease of Use, Responsiveness, Fulfillment, Security/ Privacy, Personalization, Visual Appearance, Information Quality, Trust, and Interactivity.

The eFitness® Check is an online based benchmarking tool to evaluate the use of ICTs by DMOs and hotels. It has been developed by the University of Applied Sciences of Western Switzerland Valais, Lucerne University of Applied Sciences and Arts, and the University of Applied Sciences FH Salzburg in cooperation with i-con@ Internet Consultancy and different tourism regions in Germany, Austria, and Switzerland. The development of the tool was part of two EU-funded Interreg projects called eFitness Benchmarking im Tourismus (2005–2008) and eTourism Fitness (2009–2011) (Interreg Bayern – Österreich, 2012). The aim of the projects was to facilitate an objective comparison of websites, information technology, and e-marketing approaches implemented by German, Swiss, and Austrian tourism destinations. The benchmarking platform compares approaches within the industry and allows tourism enterprises to identify potentials concerning usage of ICTs which in turn may lead to competitive advantages. The eFitness® Check is based on 138 criteria covering the following topics: eMarketing, IT infrastructure, website quality, and e-mail customer service. All criteria have been derived from previous literature. It allows evaluating websites systematically pertaining to ten success dimensions.

Looking at all quantitative/ counting approach suggestions in literature, it becomes obvious that such approaches have to be adapted continuously to account for new features arising. None of the empirical studies looked at advances with respect to social media in an adequate level of depth (Hofbauer, Stangl, & Teichmann, 2010). However, modifications of evaluation schemes and catalogues of criteria respectively are imperative to perform up-to-date benchmarking.

Table 1 summarises the most elementary information of the two most recent studies (published after 2005; for a comparison of older guidelines refer to Hofbauer et al., 2010) dealing with quantitative/ counting website evaluation approaches.

Table 1. Comparison of website evaluation approaches

| Author (year) | IFITT / UNWTO (2005) | eFitness® Check (2005) |
|---------------|--|--|
| Dimensions | Accessibility & Readability, Identity & Trust, Customization & Interactivity, Navigation, Findability & SEO, Technical Performance | CRM, Prices & Offer, Design, Text & Illustrations, Legal Aspects, Navigation & Usability, Quality E-Mail Response, Booking Procedure, Responsiveness E-Mail, SEO & Access, Services, Useful Information & Infrastructure |
| Web 2.0 | No | Facebook or Flickr-Plug-Ins, etc., Tell-a-Friend-Feature |
| Answer scale | Higher weightings for critical criteria | Binary scale |

| Groups focused on in the study | Hospitality websites | DMO websites |
|--------------------------------|--------------------------|---|
| Tested | No information available | Two empirical studies |
| Actually used by industry | No available information | Two Interreg Projects, eFitness Benchmarking im Tourismus (2005–2008), eTourism Fitness (2009–2011) |

3 METHODOLOGY

The present study used the eFitness® Check approach as a basis and updated the evaluation framework by recent advances in technology. The eFitness® Check is used because it is a comprehensive approach which has been tested and validated in the tourism industry (Fritsch, Schneider, Liebrich, & Schegg, 2009) and it takes into account some social media features. The dimensions and criteria suggested by the original eFitness® Check were compared with the dimensions and criteria identified as key website success factors in the meta-analysis by Park and Gretzel (2007). This comparison was done to see if all dimensions dealt with in literature are covered. Based on this comparison, the ten dimensions suggested by the eFitness®-Check were extended by the two dimensions Interactivity and Trust. The two dimensions Quality of E-Mail Response and Responsiveness E-Mail were combined to build a new dimension called Quality of E-Mail Response. Next, a sample of five DMO websites was used to double-check criteria for each dimension.

The catalogue of eFitness Check-Update finally consists of eleven dimensions comprising 148 criteria. For each criterion definitions were determined minimizing the risk of subjective and/or inconsistent evaluations between coders. The dimensions as well as three examples of criteria related to each dimension are given in Table 2; the actual amount of criteria of each dimension is given in brackets. Note for the two new dimensions Interactivity and Trust all criteria found on DMO websites are presented.

Table 2. Dimensions and related criteria of the eFitness Check-Update

| Dimension | Relationship | Examples of Criteria |
|--|--------------|--|
| Customer Management (12) | Relationship | E-mail within two clicks starting from homepage, contact details, contact form |
| Prices & Offer (10) | | Overview/ list of prices, payment options, special offers |
| Design, Text & Illustrations (21) | | Text structured by headlines, clear-cut design of website, seasonal photographs |
| Legal Aspects (3) | | Site notice of operator, availability of general business terms, information on data protection |
| Navigation & Usability (19) | | Consistent menu bar, recognizable links, downloads: indication of file type |
| Quality of E-Mail-Response (20) | | Address customer with correct name, alternative offers if offer not available, link to website |
| Booking Procedure (11) | | Search engine for accommodations, online booking, sale of gift vouchers |
| SEO & Access (11) | | Optimised for several browsers, meaningful title tag, Google page-rank higher than three |
| Services, Useful Information & Infrastructure (22) | | Links leisure activity provider, tours in destination (incl. descriptions/pictures), weather forecast |
| Interactivity (14) | | Forum or chat, FAQs, newsletter, customised newsletter for target groups, interactive maps, multimedia apps (e.g., videos, virtual tours, and interactive panorama view), LiveCam, switch of music, web 2.0 & social |

| | |
|-----------|---|
| Trust (5) | media apps (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, Xing, and Flickr), Tell-a-Friend feature, guest-book, raffles or sweepstakes, route planner with pre-adjusted aim: destination, infotainment features (e.g., e-cards and screen-savers) Always visible destination logo/ slogan, information about DMO, no contradictory information, links solely to trustful partners |
|-----------|---|

To empirically test the eFitness Check-Update catalogue of criteria, a sample of 40 DMO websites from Alpine tourism regions in Austria and Switzerland (at least one DMO in every holiday region mentioned in the list published by BAK Basel Economics, 2011) has been chosen randomly resulting in 19 destinations located in Austria and 21 in Switzerland. Table 3 summarises the 40 DMOs included in the following evaluation process.

An excel sheet has been used to gather data for each of the 40 websites. Each website has been accessed and looked at if a certain criteria is fulfilled/ available (= coded with 1) or not (= coded with 0). The whole evaluation and coding procedure was done jointly by two authors of this article in May 2012.

In order to reveal the DMOs' performance regarding the dimension Quality of E-Mail-Response, a mystery-check e-mail was sent to the DMOs on May 1st 2012. The e-mail requested information for a planned trip to the destination. To gain information with respect to all criteria the dimension Quality of E-Mail-Response covers, the e-mail asks for information for a family with two children searching for an accommodation in a four star hotel, price of the offer, suggestions for leisure activities with children, further information about the destination, etc. Within two weeks 100% of the DMOs answered to the inquiry. The responses were systematically coded concerning the criteria given by the eFitness Check-Update.

Table 3. List of DMOs analysed in this study

| Austria | | Switzerland | |
|---------------------------------|----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| Alpbachtal and Tiroler Seenland | Pillerseetal | Adelboden | Lago Maggiore e Valli |
| Alpenregion Bludenz | Saalbach-Hinterglemm | Aletsch | Lenk/Simmental |
| Bregenzerwald | Salzburg/Umgebung | Arosa | Lenzerheide |
| Region Hohe Salve | Salzburger Sportwelt | Belinzona Alto Ticino | Leukerbad |
| Region Lungau | Seefeld | Chur | Samnaun |
| Region Nationalpark | St. Anton/Arberg | Crans Montana | Toggenburg |
| Grossarlal | Villacher Skiberge | Davos Klosters | Verbier |
| Innsbruck/Umgebung | Wolfgangsee | Disentis/Sendrum | Villars Gryon |
| Kleinwalsertal | | Engelberg | Weggis |
| Lammertal/Dachstein | | Goms | Zermatt |
| Paznaun | | Gstaad | |

4 ANALYSIS

The data was analysed with help of IBM-software SPSS. The performance of each DMO website was looked at on three levels: single criteria, dimension, and overall performance. A criterion obviously could either have a value of 1 (= fulfilled/ available) or 0 (= not fulfilled/ available). To get insights with respect to the various dimensions, the scores of the criteria of the respective dimensions were summed up; the higher the score the better the performance. For instance, the dimension Customer Relationship Management comprises 12 criteria. Consequently the highest score that can be achieved by a DMO website is 12 (please see Table 1 for the amount of criteria each dimension comprises, it is given in brackets in column 1).

In a next step, the overall performance of the websites was calculated by summing up the scores of all dimensions (maximal score = 148). To reveal the performance of Austrian and Swiss DMO websites, the scores of all DMOs for the respective country were summarised, then, the average results of the countries were compared.

Further, based on the achieved scores by all DMOs, it was decided whether a dimension belongs to either Group 1 labelled Common State Dimensions, Group 2 called Competitive Advantage Dimensions, or Group 3 labelled Future Potential Dimensions. In more detail, this means if at least 80% of all criteria of a dimension are fulfilled/ available on all DMO websites, it is assumed that these criteria are "must-have" criteria; thus, these dimensions belong to Group 1, the Common State Dimensions. If all DMO websites achieve between 60% and 79% of all possible scores with respect to a dimension, the dimension belongs to Group 2. This second group of dimensions allows DMOs to gain a competitive advantage if they succeed in performing well. Group 3, the Future Potential Dimensions, contains dimensions succeeding at a level of less than 60% for the respective criteria. As not many DMOs fulfil/ apply criteria of dimensions belonging to the third group, it provides a possibility to position a destination and gain competitive advantage.

5 RESULTS

5.1 Criteria- and Dimension-Based Performance

The overall eFitness Check-Update scores of the particular DMOs range from a minimum of 81 points to a maximum of 121 points achieved out of 148. Hence, there is a range of 40 points between the weakest and the strongest website performance. The overall performance throughout the whole data set is quite concentrated around the mean of 105.5 points. Out of 40 websites 33 achieved between 96 and 112 points.

Looking at the criteria level, twenty four criteria (e.g., provision of e-mail-contact, accommodation search engine, availability-check of accommodation, booking tool, opening hours of visitor center available, no disturbing advertisements, complete price-information) were fulfilled by all DMOs while seven criteria (i.e., toll-free hotline, toll-free booking hotline, not more than 50 external links, forum/ chat, customised newsletter, infotainment offers such as games, e-cards, and screensavers, raffles or sweepstakes) were not fulfilled by any DMO.

Furthermore, only ten of the 40 DMOs offer an eye catcher on their website. Half of the destinations use a too small or hard to read font style and only 19 offer a picture gallery. Twenty five destinations (i.e., more than half) do not provide a basic contact form. Twenty eight do not offer rates in form of a price list and only six provide prices in foreign currencies.

5.2 Benchmarking Austrian and Swiss DMO Websites

A comparison of the website performance of DMOs from Austria and Switzerland shows that Swiss DMOs are doing quite well. They perform better in all dimensions except *Legal Aspects*, *Navigation & Usability*, and *Trust*. Especially in terms of *Price & Offer*, Swiss DMOs fulfil much more criteria than Austrian DMOs; 84.3% and 51.6% respectively. For further comparisons please see Fig. 2 which also shows the classification into the three groups (i.e., Common State-, Competitive Advantage-, and Future Potential Dimensions) again.

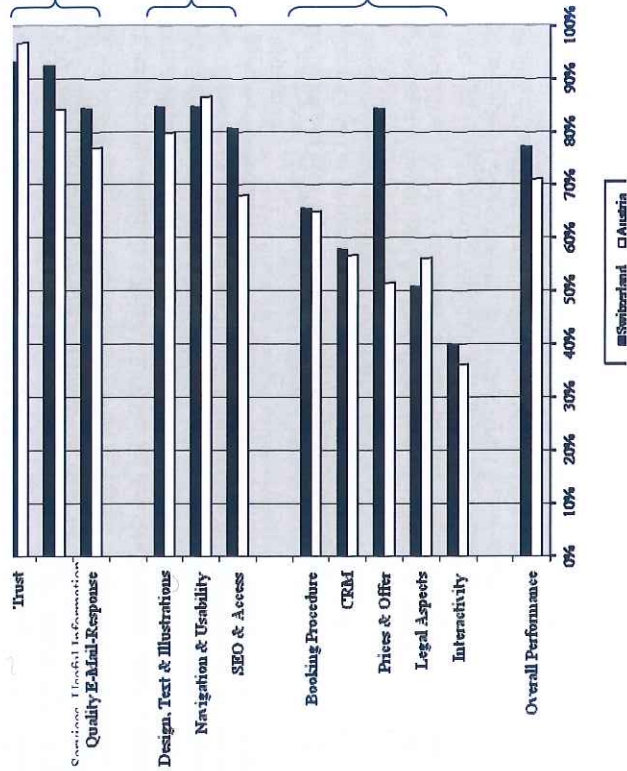


Fig. 2. Benchmarking of Austrian and Swiss DMO-Websites

6 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

In summary, the analysed DMO websites show a respectable overall performance by achieving an average of 67.4% of all points available. This observation is in line with website evaluation results of regional destination organizations (RTO) by Burgess, Parish, and Alcock (2011). These authors found that RTO websites in Australia have progressed from basic web presence (analysis in 2000) to higher levels of development in 2008 characterised by greater sophistication and functionality. It seems therefore that tourism organizations are now generally more familiar and experienced with respect to the value of websites as important marketing and communication tool.

However, the *Future Potential Dimensions* offer decisive opportunities for the web-design of all destinations in the study. Especially, the dimension *Interactivity* provides massive room for gaining competitive advantage in the future. Results in this dimension are quite alarming as literature identifies especially interactivity as an increasingly relevant website feature in the

Thirteen DMOs deliver alternative offers in case of a non-successful search request on the site and even less (7 DMOs) do direct booking of special offers or arrangements.

On overall the five top performing DMOs are: Arosa, Adelboden, Davos Klosters, Chur, and Saalbach-Hinterglemm. Out of 148 possible points these DMOs achieved overall scores of 121, 118, 116, 116, and 112 respectively.

Considering the average performance of all DMOs regarding each dimension Fig. 1 shows that the dimension *Trust* is fulfilled by 95.0%, followed by *Services, Useful Information & Infrastructure* (84.6%), and *Quality of E-Mail Response* (80.8%). The weakest dimensions are *Interactivity* (35.9%), *Legal Aspects* (50.0%), *Prices & Offer* (52.8%), *CRM* (57.3%), and *Booking Procedure* (58.5%).

Fig. 1 also shows the classification of the dimensions into the three groups based on the average scores achieved by all DMOs. It reveals that out of eleven dimensions only three are classified as *Common State Dimensions* indicating that only for these dimensions (i.e., *Trust*, *Services, Useful Information & Infrastructure*; and *Quality of E-Mail Response*) DMOs fulfil more than 80% of the related criteria. Three dimensions are fulfilled by 60 to 79%, therefore, *Design, Text & Illustrations*, *Navigation & Usability*, and *SEO & Access* are assigned to the group *Competitive Advantage Dimensions*. A majority of five dimensions are on average fulfilled by less than 60% of DMO websites analysed. Low performances can be recognised for *Booking Procedure*, *CRM*, *Price & Offer*, *Legal Aspects*, and *Interactivity*; thus, these dimensions are *Future Potential Dimensions*.

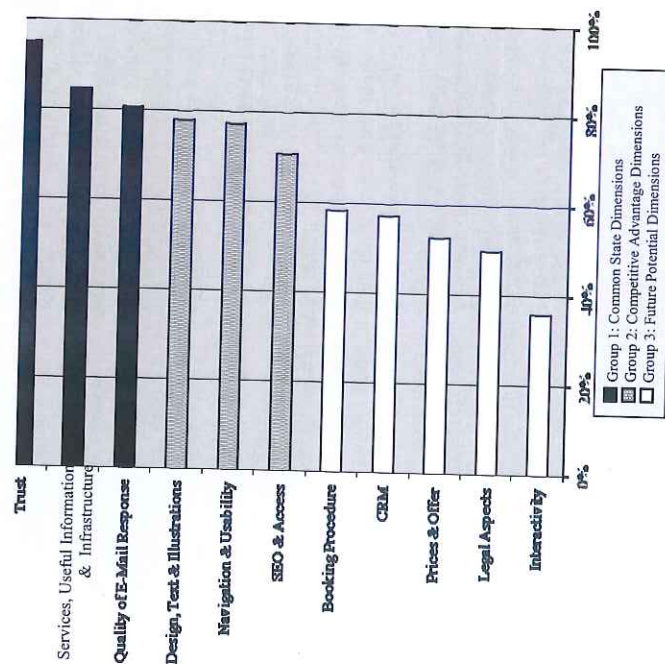


Fig. 1. Classification of Dimensions of the eFitness Check Updated

web 2.0 era (Chen & Chen, 2004). Therefore, it is vital for website development that recent knowledge found in scientific publications is carried into practice. A concrete action to improve with respect to the *Interactivity* dimension could be for example the implementation of a 360°-panorama-view or other forms of virtual tours. Whereas the hotel industry has long since recognised the importance of such tools (Wei, Ruys, van Hoof, & Combrink, 2001), only few DMOs currently profit from these technical innovations. Features like panorama-views and virtual tours give the customer a first insight into the destination and its surroundings and thereby foster emotional stimulation (Burgess, Cooper & Alcock, 2001; Spaulding, Wells, Moody, Moffit, & Madariaga, 2006).

For the improvement of the dimension *Customer Relationship Management*, the provision of a basic contact form and a toll-free telephone number is a must for destinations. Such tools facilitate the direct assistance of the customer in case of occurring problems with the convenient use of the website, bookings, or any other issues.

To further develop the dimension *Prices & Offer*, DMOs should attach great importance to the condensed displaying of prices in form of price-lists. This assists the customer in terms of price comparisons. Further potentials offer the provision of seasonal prices, the complete breakdown of prices by included items, and the indication of special discounts. In addition, the clear outline of potential payment methods and the display of prices in foreign currencies would be appreciated.

As the disclosure of *Legal Aspects* can be of extensive importance in terms of trust DMOs are highly recommended to implement general business terms on their homepages and to inform the users about the protection of their personal data.

With respect to the dimension *Booking Procedure*, a promising option is to identify and present alternatives to the customer if the desired offer is not available or vacant. Furthermore, the DMOs should facilitate the direct booking of additional/ special offers or arrangements on the DMO-websites. Providing direct booking options enhances the comfort of the customer and prevents her/him from leaving the DMO website.

Finally, a future study has to evaluate the relative importance of the criteria and dimensions of website performance included in the *eFitness Check-Update* to account for the strength of impact of each criterion.

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Branding at the Wine & Spa Resort LOISIUM, Langenlois – An Evaluation of the Awareness Level and Brand Image

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Abstract

This paper deals with wine and spa tourism branding in Austria, focusing on the Wine & Spa Resort LOISIUM Langenlois, a specialist wine and architecture hotel providing spa treatments. By means of two self-administered surveys targeting current and former clients of the hotel, an online panel and an online questionnaire, the following concepts are researched among three distinct target groups: brand awareness of the Wine & Spa Resort LOISIUM Langenlois among the Austrian population, its brand image and brand associations, motives for visitation of a wine and spa hotel and guest satisfaction at the hotel. In addition, it is measured whether the hotel is perceived by itself or in connection with the LOISIUM World of Wine, a tourist attraction run under the same name but competing for brand awareness.

Keywords: wine tourism, spa tourism, brand awareness, brand image

1 INTRODUCTION

A current trend in our ever-changing society is the development towards lifestyle and personal wellbeing (Eberle, 2004). Health and wellness tourism shows the highest growth rate in this field and is Austria's third most important tourism segment (Schumacher, 2011). However, wellbeing not only includes an intact health but also pleasure and exceptional experiences for the mind (Eberle, 2004). Today, immersions into special interest segments with customised services provide customer value. Hence, specialists and niche market companies dominate the future of the tourism industry (Holzknecht, 2008).

One such recently emerging niche segment is that of wine and spa tourism. Wine tourism has become a major market in Austria. Due to the nature of the tourism product, a service, the extra challenge of intangibility exists in combination with heavy competition. To face these threats, brands are means for quality assurance and differentiation (Holzknecht, 2008). Combining all these factors together, the research object of this paper is the Wine & Spa Resort LOISIUM Langenlois, a niche hotel conveying high quality customer experience. Research concerns the brand name, which combines the areas of wine and spa that constitute of the major services of the hotel. Brand awareness and brand image are the main factors to be measured from both, guests and non-guests of this hotel.

1.1 Aim of the paper

Academically, the paper combines past theory with new findings by providing an understanding of the Austrian wine and spa branding market as well as applying this to a real-life example. Also, the lack of literature on wine and spa branding justifies this project. A further objective is to provide a proper analysis of the empirical survey revealing brand awareness, image and associations with it to answer the research questions. In addition, possible motivations of future hotel guests and satisfaction of current guests will be revealed.