Chapter 6

A Study of Web 2.0 Tourism Sites: A Usability and Web Features Perspective

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**ABSTRACT**

The term Web 2.0 was coined around 2004 and was used to describe more interactive types of websites developed after the dot-com crash. An important characteristic of Web 2.0 sites is premised on being able to incorporate various technologies and applications within the site to enhance functionality. This enhanced functionality is primarily associated with such sites being able to publish and display diverse content—content that is user-contributed, or where the site might draw information synergistically from a third party. This increased functionality potentially affects two traditional areas of website implementation. Firstly, the embedding of applications within a website tends to increase design complexity that can contribute to a detrimental user experience when browsing—in turn, affecting website usability. Secondly, Web 2.0 sites in allowing users to publish, display and list diverse views, opinions, pictures, sounds, and so forth, will impact content and design features that are not encountered on traditional websites. Consequently, this chapter investigates a set of Web 2.0 tourism sites for their usability as well as reporting an overview of website content encountered. In examining these issues the paper provides a background primer on the advent of Web 2.0 sites, novel aspects of their design, including the potential for incorporating user content. Tourism sites are the focus of this chapter—both commercial and non-commercial Web 2.0 sites being of interest.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-60566-818-5.ch006
INTRODUCTION

Tourism is an information-based and information-intensive industry (Werthner & Ricci, 2004)—with tourism promotion and documentation being well suited to the Internet environment. Indeed, travellers using websites plan and purchase their travel is arguably now the norm, whereby the Internet “has become one of the most successful channels used by consumers to research travel options, compare prices and make reservations” (Collins, Buhalis & Peters, 2003, p. 484). This type of information seeking behaviour tends to result in a higher involvement of customers in the planning process (Buhalis, 1999) of which the Internet becomes an integral part.

In recent times many Web 2.0 sites have been implemented within the tourism sphere. These Web 2.0 travel sites involve the use of a diverse range of presentation formats—text, video, images and sound—with some formats having functionality that allows a website user to contribute, update or alter existing content.

The information that is posted on Web 2.0 sites is known as user-generated-content (UGC)—a feature that delineates such sites from the older, more traditional websites that have been referred to as Web 1.0 (O’Reilly, 2005). Arguably, the opportunity available to individuals to post content on such sites is an important value-adding feature.

The emergence of Web 2.0 sites in the tourism domain allow the visitor to potentially access a greater variety of information from a myriad of sources about all aspects of travel. With respect to travel and tourism content, these UGC sites have also been referred to as Travel 2.0 (Merritt, 2006)—a term that reflects industry-specific activities and one that can be applied to the broad information content that is associated with the latest tourism websites.

Indeed, Web 2.0 can be viewed as a general term, and a noted trend is to refer to these newer forms of websites with a domain-focussed terminology—a terminology that attempts to define a more specific application sphere. Hence, different authors have used terms such as Library 2.0 (Bolan, Canada, & Cullin, 2007), Mobile-web 2.0 (Yamakami, 2007), Enterprise 2.0 (Knight, 2007) and Semantic Web 2.0 (Greaves, 2007) when referring to a specific industry area or domain.

An important aspect of Web 2.0 sites is premised on their ability to embed applications within the site to enhance functionality—functionality that allows users to contribute content, or to draw synergistically from third-party content. With respect to past website design and usability, the embedding of applications within a website tends to add a degree of complexity that can result in a sub-optimal user experience when browsing (Nielsen, 2007). Given the high degree of application functionality that Web 2.0 sites incorporate, they may not address or embrace aspects of the traditional user interface design—website interfaces that were developed and refined in the Web 1.0 era and have been generally based on good design practice.

This chapter explores and investigates a set of Web 2.0 oriented tourism websites and their usability based on Nielsen’s approach for usability evaluation. Moreover, given that Web 2.0 sites are deemed to allow new and potentially different forms of online presence, the study also presents an overview of some of the identified website components associated with these tourism sites.

The structure of the chapter is as follows. Firstly, a background section describes the advent of the Web 2.0 phenomena with respect to website features, design elements and typical content that might be encountered on such sites. The next section of the chapter deals with how tourism entities have come to use various Web 2.0 related features—features that includes blogs (web-logs), wikis, podcasts and social networks. A small section on website usability and design follows, before another component of the chapter describes how the study was undertaken (methodology). The last section of the chapter discusses the results of the study, the implications of findings,
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