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**TOURISM, SAFETY, and HEALTH INFORMATION PROVIDED ON  
OFFICIAL TOURISM WEBSITES OF NORTH, CENTRAL AND SOUTH  
AMERICAN COUNTRIES.**

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## **Abstract**

With the globalization of tourism, the touristic offer and associated promotion is essential to attract international travelers and sustain local economies. While the Americas (i.e., North, Central, and South) play host to countless inexpensive yet exotic destinations with rich cultures and history, efforts are needed to attract a considerable tourism market share. Despite a variety of channels in which to advertise the destinations, attractions, and amenities available in a country, internet-based traveler recruitment is among the most effective and serves as an educational resource for potential travelers. The primary purpose of this study was to assess the content provided on national tourism websites of 33 American countries (North=3, Central=17, South=13) as related to tourism/destinations, safety/security, contact information, and health/healthcare. A secondary purpose was to identify opportunities for countries to improve their tourism websites for potential travelers to enhance their visiting experience. A content analysis was conducted for official tourism websites utilizing a content rubric containing 36 topics. Results indicate that websites did not provide adequate information. Only 2 country websites displayed 50% of rubric topics (USA and Brazil). Most websites highlighted promotional content about the destinations. Fewer displayed information about safety/security, and even fewer displayed information about health/healthcare. Findings reveal that internet-based resources are being underutilized to promote destinations and educate international travelers, which highlights opportunities for improved efforts to meet the specific needs and behaviors of tourists visiting the Americas.

## **1. Introduction**

With over one billion international tourists traveling in 2012 (WTO, 2014), there has been a growing need to assess touristic offers of successful markets and examine the strategies they use to promote destinations and educate travelers. In 2013, the Americans accounted for 15% of all international tourist arrivals, or 168 million travelers. In the same year, the Americas accounted for 20% of all international tourism receipts, which represented \$229 billion USD. While figures in the Americas were more impressive than destinations such as Africa and the Middle East, the American tourism industry did not compare to markets in Europe (563 million arrivals, \$489 billion USD receipts), or Asia and the Pacific (248 million arrivals, \$359 billion USD receipts)(Travel Markets Inside Newsletter, 2013; WTO, 2014).

Destination travelling has clear economic benefits for host countries, but it can also promote benefits among travelers, such as personal enrichment and self-knowing (Cooper *et al.*, 2008; Stone & Petrick, 2013; Sullivan & Sheffrin, 2003). For the destinations

themselves, the market is continually becoming more competitive, based on diversity of destination offers. Successful tourist destinations are not only required to have a diverse range of tourist products, but also a dedication to marketing for the consumer (Assaf & Josiassen, 2012; Van der Veen & Song, 2014; United States Congress et al., 2011).

One important trend in the touristic market is the use of internet and social media. The use of technology has changed and continues to evolve many aspects of touristic channels, such as the role of the distributors as the touristic producers (Assaf & Josiassen, 2012). The Internet gives the consumer direct access to the information about the destination and the touristic facilities, allowing them to organize their own destination travel plans, which has given them autonomy and control over their trips.

Many countries have official tourism websites, which serve as useful mechanisms for international destination promotion. The primary attractiveness and utility of internet-based promotion is that it is inexpensive, widely available, and easily accessible to tourists and potential tourists (Smith & Amorim, 2015). Official websites are helpful to potential tourists who have yet to decide where to travel because they serve as a central location that provides neutral and trusted information (Fesenmeier, Wober & Werthner, 2006) related to important aspects of a country's accommodations, attractions, and activities. Some official websites provide helpful information about the country, which can maximize a tourist's positive experience and minimize their risk of encountering risks or dangers during their travel (Kozac & Andreu, 2006). The availability of information can improve tourists' satisfaction with the touristic offer and experience, which can result in positive recommendations to others and repeat business.

Of the countries that have official websites, much of the information provided is about lodging, food, local culture, and businesses. It is far less common to find information about safety and security to guide tourists. Tourists need to have a more reliable source of information regarding safety and security; giving them the same autonomy and confidence they are given in choosing other aspects of their travel. However, the extent to which useful information is provided on official tourism websites is unknown in the Americas. As such,

the primary purpose of this study was to assess the content provided on national tourism websites of 33 American countries (North=3, Central=17, South=13) as related to tourism/destinations, safety/security, contact information, and health/healthcare. A secondary purpose was to identify opportunities for countries to improve their tourism websites for potential travelers to enhance their visiting experience.

## **2. The purpose of the official tourism websites**

Today, the Internet is considered one of the most consulted sources of travel information. Users value the Internet as a reliable and important source of information nearly as much as they value recommendations from family and friends (Oxford Economics Company, 2013). Other sources of information included personal experiences, travel agencies and tourism offices, radio and TV, free brochures, and paid guidebooks.

“Tourism Economics” points out that the Internet encourages individuals to be active on review sites, by recounting experiences, posting photos, and sharing other relevant information. Users are given the opportunity to comment about their experiences and share this information with other users, creating a connection between those users. Consumers typically review destinations such as museums, exhibits, restaurants, hotels, and theme parks. Posting photos and videos on social media and networks is another common way consumers encourage and motivate other individuals to travel to the same destination. Positive reviews and a high number of shares can drive sales without much direct input from the destination itself (Oxford Economics Company, 2013). Therefore, the basis of this success is dependent upon the trust placed on the reviews posted by other customers.

The impact of the virtual world in tourism business cannot be ignored. Yet, certain information that may be relevant for the buyer’s decision-making process has no official space on the Internet. This paper discusses information related to security and safety that can be relevant before and during a visit. Without circulating relevant information through appropriate communication channels, a traveler’s perceived risk related to a destination can be higher than the actual risk (or vice versa). An official source of information is essential to

provide the necessary safety information about the destination, which can help attract and protect the tourist (Elliot, Papadopoulos & Kim, 2011; Korstanje, 2009; Mansfeld and Pizam, 2006; Tarlow, 2014; WTO, 1996).

For several destinations, providing the crime rates, for example, can construct a negative image of the destination in the consumers mind and detract them from traveling to that destination. In these cases, the destination can identify a better way to provide guidelines without instilling fear and hesitation. Using socially responsible marketing techniques is one of the ways to help avoid this situation. These techniques assume that the tourist is visiting a destination with different cultural, social, legal, and political contexts, and they may not be aware of local customs and guidelines (Pizam, Tarlow & Bloom, 1997; Shepherd, 2006; WTO, 1996).

By providing appropriate information about the destination, the tourist has a better likelihood of a positive tourist experience, which can also benefit the destination because they will gain a loyal client that will recommend this destination to other friends and relatives. If not given adequate information prior to travel, tourists may have a negative experience, and will similarly share them with friends and relatives. This has the potential to negatively affect the destination in terms of image and reputation (WTO, 1996; Shepherd, 2006).

The World Tourism Organization (WTO, 1996, p. 155) states that it is the responsibility of international agencies, governments, and other public authorities to provide information about potential safety and security disruptions to tourists. This can include terrorist events, transportation breakdowns, social disturbances, extreme weather events, and other major safety concerns (WTO, 1996, p. 153). Furthermore, the WTO points out that this information should be included with marketing and promotion materials that cover legal contents, local regulations, and other important practices that tourists need to know.

### **3. Materials and methods**

A content analysis was conducted using official tourism websites of 33 North, Central, and South American countries. Websites were evaluated utilizing a content rubric, which was developed by study investigators and guided by literature pertaining to relevant tourism, safety, security, and health topics (Smith & Amorim, 2015). A total of 36 topics were identified and included in the rubric. Using previously established rubric methods (Smith & Amorim, 2015), official websites were assessed related to destination/promotion (i.e., city characteristics, recommended destinations, attractions, transportation, lodging, climate, cultural aspects, and accessible tourism), safety/security (i.e., dangerous locations, recommendations to avoid crime, and airline travel as well as food, water, and wildlife safety), local authority contact information (i.e., embassy/consulates, security force, healthcare), and health/healthcare (i.e., vaccination requirements, health system information, and prescription medication information as well as laws/regulations about drugs, alcohol, tobacco, driving, and sexual behaviors).

Using established review protocol (Smith & Amorim, 2015; Smith, Amorim, & Umbelino, 2013), all portions of the websites were reviewed for content regarding the above mentioned topics and sub-topics. Information obtained from each website was recorded in the content rubric. Rubric cells were marked with an “x” to indicate the website included content about the topic or sub-topic. Column totals were summed and frequencies were calculated. Two Central American countries without official tourism websites were omitted from analyses, thus 33 websites were included in the final analytic sample.

### **4. Results**

Table 1 reports findings from the content analyses of 33 North, Central, and South American countries’ official websites. As documented elsewhere (Smith & Amorim, 2015), websites were evaluated for content presented based on 36 topics related to categories of destination/promotion (n = 14 topics), safety/security (n = 11 topics), local authority

contacts (n = 3 topics), and health/healthcare (n = 8 topics). It is important to note that some topics may be appropriately classified in multiple categories. The percent of topics represented on official websites ranged from 5.6% to 58.3%.

In terms of destination/promotion, 78.8% of official websites contained information about characteristics of main cities. Approximately 82% of websites provided recommendations to tourists regarding destinations to visit. Ninety-seven percent of websites provided recommendations to tourists related to cultural and 93.9% about natural attractions. While 72.7% of websites contained information about lodging, 75.8% of website provided information about transportation and 78.8% about their country's climate. Regarding aspects of local culture, 60.6% provided information about language, 36.4% about food, and 30.3% about religion. Only a small fraction of websites contained information specific to accessible tourism topics such as equipment (12.1%), locations/attractions (12.1%), transportation (6.1%), and services (6.1%).

When comparing website content based on destination/promotion categories, information reported in the categories of main city characteristics, recommended destinations and attractions, transportation, lodging and climate was highly represented. Larger proportions of North and Central American websites reported information related to transportation and lodging, whereas larger proportions of Central and South American websites reported information related to climate. Information about accessible tourism was quite non-existent. A larger proportion of North American websites reported information about all four accessible tourism topics relative to Central and South American websites.

In terms of safety and security, 30.3% provided recommendations about ways in which to avoid criminality or terrorism, and 9.1% of websites contained information about the security status of the country or in specific regions/cities. No websites reported information about dangerous locations as related to criminality or terrorism. Regarding content specific to airline travel, 66.7% of websites provided information about immigration/visa, 66.7% about currency, and 18.2% about customs. Very few websites provided information related to travel restrictions (3.0%) or safety recommendations (0.0%). Of the 33 websites, 33.3%



contained information about water safety, 6.1% about food safety, and 3.0% about local wildlife safety.

When comparing website content based on security and safety categories, a larger proportion of Central American websites reported information related to the security status of the country or in specific regions/cities, whereas larger proportions of Central and South American websites provided recommendations about ways in which to avoid criminality or terrorism. A larger proportion of North American websites provided information about airline topics (i.e., customs, immigration/visa, currency) relative to Central and South American websites. However, larger proportions of Central and South American websites provided information about food safety and water safety.

In terms of local authority contacts, 30.3% of websites provided contact information specific to healthcare, 21.2% provided contact information specific to national Embassies or Consulates, and 9.1% provided contact information specific to security forces.

When comparing website content based on local authority contact categories, two out of the three North American websites provided contact information specific to national Embassies or Consulates. Some of the Central and Southern American websites provided contact information specific to security forces, whereas larger proportions of North and Central American websites provided contact information specific to healthcare.

In terms of health and healthcare, the representation is quite inexpressive: 36.4% of websites listed requirements about vaccinations, over 30% of websites contained information about the healthcare system including content about insurance and 18.2% provided information about prescription medications. Regarding laws and regulations related health topics, 30.3% of websites provided information about driving a motor vehicle, 12.1% provided information related to drug consumption, 6.1% contained information about tobacco use, and 3.0% contained information about alcoholic beverage consumption. None of the websites provided information about regulations related to sexual behavior.

When comparing website content based on health/healthcare, the largest proportion of South American websites contained information about vaccination requirements and health system information. The largest proportion of North American websites (two out of three) contained information about the health system and prescription medications. All the other categories have inexpressive representation, with the exception of the Central American websites as related to driving regulations.

**Table 1. Percent of Countries Reporting Each Topic\***

TOPIC	Percent of Countries Reported			
	Total (n = 33)	North (n = 3)	Central (n = 17)	South (n = 13)
<b>DESTINATION / PROMOTION</b>				
Main City Characteristics (size, population, history, etc.)	78.8%	66.7%	76.5%	84.6%
Recommended Destinations	81.8%	100.0%	70.6%	92.3%
Recommended Attractions	--	--	--	--
Cultural	97.0%	100.0%	100.0%	92.3%
Natural	93.9%	100.0%	94.1%	92.3%
Transportation	75.8%	100.0%	82.4%	61.5%
Lodging	72.7%	100.0%	82.4%	53.8%
Climate	78.8%	66.7%	82.4%	76.9%
Aspects of Local Culture	--	--	--	--
Religion	30.3%	0.0%	35.3%	30.8%
Language	60.6%	33.3%	58.8%	69.2%
Food	36.4%	66.7%	29.4%	38.5%
Accessible Tourism**	--	--	--	--
Transportation	6.1%	33.3%	5.9%	0.0%
Services	6.1%	33.3%	5.9%	0.0%
Equipment	12.1%	33.3%	17.6%	0.0%
Locations/Attractions	12.1%	33.3%	11.8%	7.7%
<b>SAFETY &amp; SECURITY</b>				
Security in the Country or Specific Regions/Cities	9.1%	0.0%	17.6%	0.0%
Dangerous Locations (criminality/terrorism)	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Recommendations about Criminality/Terrorism Avoidance	30.3%	0.0%	41.2%	23.1%
Airline Travel	--	--	--	--
Safety Recommendations	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Travel Restrictions	3.0%	0.0%	5.9%	0.0%
Customs	18.2%	66.7%	11.8%	15.4%
Immigration/Visa	66.7%	100.0%	76.5%	46.2%
Currency	66.7%	100.0%	58.8%	69.2%
Food Safety**	6.1%	0.0%	5.9%	7.7%
Water Safety (especially for coastal areas)**	33.3%	0.0%	41.2%	30.8%
Local Wildlife Safety (insects, animals, etc.)**	3.0%	0.0%	0.0%	7.7%

LOCAL AUTHORITY CONTACTS				
Embassy/Consulates Contacts	21.2%	66.7%	17.6%	15.4%
Security Force Contacts	9.1%	0.0%	11.8%	7.7%
Healthcare Contacts	30.3%	33.3%	41.2%	15.4%
HEALTH & HEALTHCARE				
Vaccination Requirements	36.4%	33.3%	29.4%	46.2%
Health System Information (including insurance)	30.3%	66.7%	23.5%	30.8%
Prescription Medication Information (including purchasing)	18.2%	66.7%	17.6%	7.7%
Drug Consumption (Laws)	12.1%	33.3%	17.6%	0.0%
Alcoholic Beverage Consumption (Laws)	3.0%	33.3%	0.0%	0.0%
Tobacco Use (Laws)	6.1%	33.3%	5.9%	0.0%
Driving (Laws)	30.3%	33.3%	47.1%	7.7%
Sexual Behavior (Laws)	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%

\* 33 of 35 AMERICAN countries represented in analyses

\*\*Topics also considered to be related to health

## 5. Discussion

Over the last decade, technology and the Internet have become heavily involved in many of the ways people connect. People are utilizing technology not only to virtually connect with others, but also to plan destination travel. Tourism sites have begun using this technology to promote their destinations using websites to provide information to and attract customers. However, because there is no official guideline for posting tourist information, destinations are free to post as much information as they see fit. While this offers the countries autonomy to promote their unique locations and attractions, it may also allow the National Tourism Organizations to misrepresent their countries through exaggeration and/or omission.

An official tourism website can be used for different purposes such as marketing and/or providing useful information for the tourists. Interestingly, countries and destinations across the Americas reported information differently (and using different types of information) on their websites. Some reasons for these differences may be based on different conditions of the territory and the climate, which makes providing this type of information more important (e.g., accessible tourism in the more extreme climates of the USA and Canada). Some others may relate with the characteristics of the tourism products and with the images that their managers want them to show to the public (e.g., South

American and Central American countries more often reported main city characteristics, climate information, and aspects of local culture; a higher representation of this type of information in these countries highlights the purpose of the tourism offer, which emphasizes exotic beach destinations, warm weather, and other aspects of hospitality).

Study findings suggest that more developed countries have more information on their official websites, which may reflect their higher terrorism risk, and/or more developed security systems. North America reported more information about safety and security of airline travel relative to countries in Central and South America. Among other reasons, this increased information on official tourism websites in North America may stem from the terrorist attacks of September 11<sup>th</sup> and the resulting dramatic changes to airline security, security checkpoints, and carry-on baggage and liquid restrictions. North America also had more information related to the healthcare system and medications, which may reflect some regulation which is present, namely in the United States, but probably even more in the structural levels of development and cultural practices.

Central and South America reported more information about food and water safety. Official websites containing this type of information may reflect the inherent risks in these countries. With a known reputation for water-borne illnesses and high risk for gastrointestinal viruses and illnesses, these countries show responsibility for and accountability to their potential travelers by transparently displaying this information on their websites. Further, as expected, more websites in South America contained information about vaccinations on their official websites. This was expected because of the large number of communicable and vector-borne illnesses indigenous to those countries.

Despite all these focused comments, in synthesis we believe the main reasons for the difference in websites (types and deepness of information) are related with the local cultures and the countries' levels of economic development. As the authors recognized in other study but being also truth in this case (Smith et al., 2014, p. 9), “(...) *information may mean different things to those in different countries. In developed countries, tourism information not only includes basic concepts such as weather and accommodations, but*

*also more details to guide travelers about what to expect upon arrival to their country (e.g., laws related to the legal drinking age or crime rates). Unfortunately in some instances, developing countries may lack the resources and the surveillance infrastructure to systematically monitor national rates and trends related to tourism, economics, politics, security, health, healthcare, or crime.”*

There were limitations to this study that must be acknowledged. First, the format and organization of official tourism websites differed based on their language and other characteristics. Therefore, despite systematic website reviews, some rubric content may have been provided on the website, but unintentionally overlooked by the content assessor. Second, only one content assessor was used to assess all 33 websites in this study. While this is seen as a limitation because there it limited the ability to measure inter-rater reliability, having the same content assessor ensured consistency in review processes and content documentation. Third, the rubric created for this study was not all encompassing and may have omitted important topics relevant to destinations/promotion, safety and security, local authorities, and health and healthcare. Finally, as we wrote previously (Smith et al., 2014, p. 9), “(...) *this study was descriptive in nature because it is part of a larger project that compares all continents’ use of official tourism websites. More complete and sophisticated analyses will be performed in the future.*”

A primary take-home message from this study is that different countries have different priorities relating to messages they want to highlight and promote to potential visitors. While it is well understood that countries would use their official websites to promote destinations and attract new travelers, less is known about the drivers for posting safety, security, and health messages. The Internet provides an opportunity for each destination country to identify what information they should include to attract travelers, the information less emphasized (or missing in most cases) may be among the most important for tourism safety, security, and satisfaction. Internet-based promotion of destinations can provide accurate, reliable, and current information about countries and destinations as well as recent noteworthy events. The more information the customer is able to gather on their

own (both before and during their travel), the more confident they will feel making travel decisions.

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