

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF SPANISH TOURIST WEBSITES*

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Abstract

An analysis of the 430 hotel, tourist destination, travel agency, transport, restaurant and leisure activity websites offers a clear view of the communicative behaviour of Spanish tourism companies in terms of design, functionality and customer value.

A tool containing 21 attributes related to e-commerce from a customer perspective has been constructed for measuring websites.

The results obtained suggest significant interest in the websites' design, with an emphasis on aesthetics: low levels of functionality in searches, in the development of e-commerce and in the low customisation of the offer; and little interest in transmitting customer value-added, i.e. customers are given scarce information on price and are, at the same time, directed straight to e-shopping.

The transport sector and tourist destinations attain the highest overall rating, while traditional travel agencies and restaurants attain the lowest overall rating.

Keywords

Distribution systems. Tourism website. Tourism & TICs. Web evaluation tools

* This research has been conducted in collaboration with BANCOTEL.

1. OBJECTIVE

We have attempted to ascertain the positioning of Spanish tourism companies, through their websites, in order to capture a clear picture of the type of content and formats being offered to customers through this bi-directional communication and sales method. This paper has been produced at a time in which the Internet no longer acts exclusively as a new channel, but also as a substantial element of the general population's lifestyle: offered as an innovative communication system, free of intermediaries. The paper sets out to analyse the design, functionality and customer value that Spanish tourism companies present through the architecture of their websites.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The economic crisis has accentuated the trend in Spain towards the use of Internet for everything connected with travel. Nielsen Online España (2009) reports that despite the drop in business in the second half of 2008, the use of Internet in looking for travel packs grew by 32% in the period 2008-2009. DBK (2008) came to very similar conclusions in its annual report, noting that spending on Internet-booked trips in 2008 rose 20% compared with the previous year, which translates to a ten-fold increase between 2003-2008. These figures and the proliferation of tourist web portals, virtual travel agencies and other mediation activities, the emergence of Web 2.0 and of social networks led to this study. Its purpose was to compare the way Spanish web sites are organised, their value for consumers and their positioning in the complex tourist distribution chain.

The study should prove useful in: redefining the role of the web; identifying the new tourism mediation functions performed by web sites; reveal companies' ability to tackle strategic change. It follows on from the work of Douglas G Pearce, in New Zealand, in search of an effective strategy for tourism distribution (Pearce, 2009). (Morrison, 2002). As one of the elements of marketing, distribution channels provide a connection between tourists and tourism companies (Buhalis, 2001). These distribution channels can be categorised as being either direct or indirect (Duke & Persia, 1993). Direct channels in the tourism industry normally run into supply and demand without the aid of channel intermediaries (Go & Williams, 1993). Indirect channels in the tourism industry involve a wide range of intermediaries between suppliers and destinations (Morrison, 2002).

"Online sales of books and travel tickets have soared because many users find the traditional channels for purchasing these articles time-consuming, awkward and dull. The use of Internet has not only speeded up many activities but also made them much easier" (Ohmae, 2005). Internet has revolutionised global tourism and the wind of change is now blowing in Spain. Several factors drive customers to the Internet, including: instant response; the convenience of purchasing online; the opportunity to compare offers and prices (Eisenberg and Eisenberg, 2005).

The present economic crisis is driving online purchases of many travel-related services. The strong price sensitivity that has given rise to low-cost tourism means travellers are increasingly cutting out non-technological middlemen. Tourist companies have led the drive to cut out intermediaries by opening their own web

sites and dealing directly with consumers. "In general, the process involves removing intermediaries between producers and consumers. The concept is strongly linked to sales, particularly because online commerce allows the middlemen to be cut out, benefitting suppliers and consumers alike. It remains to be seen what impact this will have (e.g. the obsolescence of traditional travel agencies)" (Castro, 2008).

The dissemination of decentralised information through networks is of growing importance. In the current situation of information asymmetry, the exponential growth in consumer knowledge and access challenges the business model of tourist companies, which will have to acquire significant competitive advantages if they are to thrive in the future (Vilaseca, Torrent and Lladós, 2001),

2. METHODOLOGY

The steps bulleted below were taken in carrying out a comparative analysis of Spanish tourist web sites. The objectives were to discover: the position these webs occupied; the value they provided for consumers; their positioning in the complex tourist distribution chain:

- Design of the website assessment model. Literature review of web analysis models. Based on the idea of surfing friendliness (Boronat and Pallarés, 2008), 21 attributes were selected for online commerce from the client's point of view. The model was reviewed using a web analysis tool – the Gartner Web Evaluation Application (2002). Last, weights were given for each web site. The contributions made by participants attending the 1st ESADE-HEC Conference on Transversal Topics were used to tweak the tool. The resulting attributes were placed in one of three broad groups: site design; site functionality; value for clients. These attributes were then split into ten value sub-groups (see Table 1).
- Selection of the sample. Spanish web sites sampled. We selected 430 web sites covering tourist hotels, tourist destinations (Regions, cities and islands), travel agencies (traditional and online), transport (airlines, railways, buses, ferries and car rental), restaurants and leisure (theme parks, casinos, ski resorts). The sample was taken from the ranking published in HOSTELMARKET's 2008 Annual Report. The annual ranking is of key importance in the sector and is used as the basis for similar studies. The sample was made up as follows: 25% - the companies topping the ranking; 75%, random choice among the remaining companies in each sub-sector. The sample was then weighted to reflect the ratios between the various kinds of establishments cited in the Hostelmarket ranking: 100 hotels (out of 784); 113 travel agencies (out of 246), 50 destinations chosen directly 1; 30 transport firms (out of 73), 50 restaurants (out of 224); 30 leisure firms (out of 94). We also subsequently added our own weighting.
- Focus group with travellers to check consumer attitudes to the websites. The group was used to verify participants' attitudes to the web sites in the sample.

3. RESULTS

3.1 HOTELS

Although hotels continue to sell their products through strategic and traditional partners (agencies, tour operators, and booking centres), we can say that they have generally moved towards online booking (Table 2). Most of the evaluated hotels showed stable averages with there was little dispersion between them. Hotel webs tended to relate to clients through newsletters, which were mostly of the version 1.0 variety. Corporate information (4.88) was generally fairly opaque.

Hotel web pages were rated 6.24 out of 10 for design. Static elements predominated (6.35), (appearance and consistent branding) and rated higher than user-friendliness (6.14) (navigation, “look and feel”, content breadth and depth) and functionality (6.23) (search parameters, personalisation and security). With regard to personalisation (6,17), the number of client-tailored elements and features was a little below average. There was a big difference between large and small hotel operators. The former adopt relational marketing strategies and seek greater client knowledge, turning their webs into a two-way communication channel and for providing user help. Small hoteliers’ web sites were much less advanced in these respects.

In both cases, there was a clear trend towards externalising e-Commerce through specialised companies.

Little use was made of FAQs (Frequently Asked Questions) but considerable use was made of tools to help users make their purchasing decisions.

Most web pages featured Data Security Certificates furnished by third parties.

3.2 TOURIST DESTINATIONS

These sites were characterised by excellent design, poor site functionality and middling value for clients (see Table 3). The personalisation elements were well developed in these sites (for example, the use of a travel schedule) but less use was made of relational marketing tools (loyalty programmes). Basically, they relied on viral marketing features such as postcards, computer wallpaper and videos. There was considerable similarity in the use made of these tools.

Interactive maps and product locaters were employed and good use was made of geo-location tools.

Many of the sites, in addition to using European languages, also featured Chinese and Japanese.

With regard to information and content, the activity and event agendas were bang up to date. By contrast, the corporate information provided was generally poor.

It proved difficult to tell the difference between official and non-official web sites for tourist destinations.

3.2.1 Cities

The cities chosen were: Madrid, Barcelona, Seville, Valencia, Bilbao, Zaragoza, San Sebastian, Palma de Mallorca, Granada, Malaga, Cordoba, Benidorm, Logroño, Corunna, Santiago, Oviedo, Santander, Pamplona, Leon,

Cuenca and Cáceres. The cities were chosen because of their size and/or importance as tourist destinations.

They were well-designed (8.81) but exhibited low functionality (5.72) and value for clients (5.59).

In many cases, there was no consistency between the city web site and the web site for its region either with regard to functionality or “look and feel”.

It was difficult to find the web site when the city happened to have the same name as the surrounding province (e.g. Seville).

We noted little in the way of e-commerce despite the vast scope for integrating tourist products: tickets, merchandising, guides. In general, the links to booking centres provided very little in the way of flight, hotel and restaurant reservations.

The web sites were very patchy when it came to viral marketing and personalisation. While the sites covered foreign languages fairly well, none of the sites were adapted to the needs their main clients – namely, French and German tourists.

The pages are usually jam-packed with information, which only confuses users. Accessing information is difficult, showing poor planning and strategy regarding content.

3.2.2 Regions:

The webs of the following Spanish regions and the islands of Menorca, Ibiza, Tenerife, Gran Canaria, Lanzarote, Fuerteventura (The Balearic Islands were covered through their capital, Palma, as a city) scored as follows:

Excellent design (8.90); low site functionality (5.36); fair client value (6.23).

Viral marketing and personalisation is very patchy. Andalusia used good offline TV advertising but this music resources were poorly exploited.

3.2.3 Another destinations

Costa Brava, Costa Dorada, Costa del Sol, Costa Blanca, Costa de Azahar, Costa da Morte, Costa Verde, The Silver Road, Andalusia’s Network of Medium-sized Cities are the most important tourist terms here.

The sites rated very poorly and were the most varied with regard to the following three sub-groups: design (8.48); site functionality (4.44); value for clients (5.67).

The e-commerce features were shaky and the web pages very patchy when it came to viral marketing and personalisation.

The information on the destination tends to be fairly comprehensive.

3.3 TRAVEL AGENCIES

Of all the sectors analysed, travel agencies scored lowest (see Tables 4a and 4b). The overall score was under 5 (4.25), this being the tourist sector hardest hit by the growth of ICT. Design was rated only fair (5.07) and usability (which embraces navigation, “look and feel”, content breadth and depth) was poor. However, the sites rated even worse when it came to functionality. They showed very little personalisation (3.40) and search and security features were clearly below scratch (scoring close on 4). The average score for this group was 3.92. When it came to the third major group (client value), travel agencies scored very badly. In particular, the

score for accessibility and client service was a wretched 2.25. The product orientation of these sites is palpable, which is reflected in the poor results for business content and its relation to the target market (3.46), product/service information and corporate information (3.46 and 2.91, respectively).

Traditional travel agencies versus dot com agencies

A case-by-case analysis was carried out of “dot com” travel agencies focusing specifically on the online market (see Table 5 b). The results cover 13 web sites. Despite the differences between them, they scored much higher overall (6.8) than the travel agencies. The same was true of web design (6.8), site functionality (6). However, the score for value for clients was under five (4.5), revealing little client orientation, and poor support and access to services. Online travel agents seek process automation, which opens up opportunities for adding value through customer care, management of complex services, service personalisation and delivering greater customer satisfaction.

Two points emerged in relation to e-commerce:

- There was a wide range of scores in the case of traditional travel agencies, ranging from 1 to 9, 80% of scores falling below 6. By contrast, the dot com agency scores fell between 7 and 9.
- There was a wide spread in overall scores: 80% of the traditional travel agency scores fell between 1 and 6; the same percentage of dot com agencies ranged between 7 and 8.

3.4 TRANSPORT

There is strong stress on design (8), with high levels of usability and excellent aesthetics. Functionality is reasonable (6) and e-commerce and security features are both well-developed. However, there is scant personalisation – for example, the use of relational marketing. The same applies to value for clients (6), where customer support and service pulls the score down (Table 5).

The quality and depth of content on the product, company, legal status and data protection are noteworthy but this is offset by failure to share financial information. Here, one should note the diversity in the presentation of legal notices and data protection provisions, for which there are no standards. Marketing tools (e.g. loyalty programmes) are highly developed.

Technical manuals are generally poor and are provided in various languages, especially European ones (English, German, French, Italian, Dutch).

3.4.1 Airlines

Airlines chalk up the highest scores of all the transport sub-sectors: design (8.67), site functionality (6.89) value for clients (6.50).

In general, there are no viral marketing features and two-way communication is either very limited or non-existent.

The webs contain a large number of spelling and translation mistakes in foreign language texts. FAQs are very patchy and are poorly organised in many cases.

There is little price transparency (the final price is not shown).

There is a tendency to outsource complementary products: hotel reservations are generally outsourced, which creates a mismatch between airline destinations and hotel destinations. The web sites do not generally adopt the “look and feel” of the search engines used by collaborating hotels.

Some use is made of social networks – the use made of Facebook is limited to a one-way channel (news) but the “user comments” feature was not activated.

Information (or the lack of it) on mergers and commercial alliances between some companies may confuse consumers. Generally speaking, the relationship between firms is not explained clearly.

Regional companies do not provide enough information on tourist destinations and they take little account of their customers’ countries of origin.

3.4.2 Sea transport

The web sites of the companies in this sub-group score well. Noteworthy scores are: design (8.45); site functionality (6.74); value for clients (6.37). Web design is very advanced and was the most highly-rated feature. Usability is good and aesthetic treatment is firm, consistent and highly integrated with the firm’s corporate identity.

The web pages are functional and there are few glitches with processes, which are generally straightforward. However, there is little transparency regarding prices and numerous supplements have to be added to the offer price, making it difficult to calculate the prices applicable in each case.

With regard to the value for clients, with the exception of Web 2.0 aspects, there is almost no viral marketing and two-way communication is either poor or non-existent. Regional companies do not provide sufficient information on the destination, revealing a lack of customer orientation.

3.4.3 Car rental

Scores are the lowest in the transport sector: overall score (5.71); design (7.85); site functionality (5.25); value for clients (5.29).

E-commerce was well-developed but price information was less than clear, given that various extras have to be added during the booking process. These extras were a significant percentage of the initial base price. With the odd exception, the web information is fairly standard and does not allow product customisation or facilitate two-way communication. Media information is scant and often employs outdated visual presentation.

3.4.4 Road transport

Overall scores are low (5.71). Specific scores vary widely: design (7.85); site functionality (5.23); value for clients (5.29).

E-Commerce is either non-existent or at an embryonic stage. Prices are not displayed and the web sites only contain forms for requesting prices. There is no personalisation or incorporation of Web 2.0 features. Media information is scant and is often presented in an old-fashioned way.

3.4.5 Rail

In this case, there is only one national railway company so our analysis is confined to the RENFE and AVE web sites.

The well-thought out, professional web sites reveal the company's strong commitment to online ticket sales.

Excellent design contributes to site usability and aesthetic values. E-Commerce is highly developed and the web sites provide excellent search and security functions. However the sites provide virtually no scope for personalisation.

3.5 RESTAURANTS

This is the worst-scoring sector after travel agencies. The scores were: overall (4,71); design (6.75); site functionality (3.71); value for clients (4.18) (See Table 6).

There is a big difference between the web sites of modern restaurants and of traditional restaurants. In the latter case, most of the pictures are austere, static and emphasise the establishment's traditional nature. In the former case, graphic design tends to be avant garde but in many cases fails to provide more effective communication. Modern restaurants show a greater use of relational marketing and product customisation, and of videos, web cameras and galleries of attractive photos. Virtually no use is made of viral communication. It was noted that when a restaurant forms part of a group or hotel chain, its web site is relegated to a link in the group's portal.

Most restaurants draw heavily on attractive photos, in some cases featuring high-resolution virtual visits. In this sector, both modern and traditional restaurants generally make good use of corporate information. In the former case, it is usually with an eye to franchising their operations. In the latter case, it is to stress the restaurant's long track record and reputation.

The sites of franchises make most use of Web 2.0 communication techniques. The global catering groups analysed stand out for their intensive use of B2C tools.

3.6 LEISURE

This sub-sector covers theme parks, casinos and ski resorts (Table 7). Design is a cut above average (6,99) while site functionality is below average (4.54). Value for clients is very close to the average (4.65). The overall score is 5.47, falling close to the average for all other sub-sectors. The lack of personalisation (2.96) is particularly noteworthy.

3.6.1 Theme parks

Theme parks make wide use of the Internet to sell tickets. Generally speaking, theme park web sites are much more dynamic and make better use of new technology than the rest of the sites analysed in this study.

A good example of this dynamism can be seen in the fact that during the course of this study, various theme park companies added multimedia features to their web sites, creating social networks of users and opening up video portals with a view to fostering viral marketing practices.

3.6.2 Casinos

Legal restrictions on casinos mean these companies provide scant information on their products. They usually share the web site with other branches of the company or group to which they belong. The casino side of the business is usually watered down with information on the other services provided (e.g. banquets, events, catering).

The web site layout tends to be austere and mainly relies on photo galleries to attract punters.

Little importance is given to information concerning security.

3.6.3 Ski resorts

This sub-group makes good use of technology: web cams, viral communication, personalised weather forecasting tools etc. However, there is very little personalisation of online offers. The pages usually employ attractive, avant-garde graphic design and are easy and intuitive to navigate. They are targeted at a highly active, young market. This is obvious in the design of the web sites and in the communication strategies used.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The following conclusions can be drawn from the comparative analysis of Spanish tourist web sites and from the travellers' focus group:

1. Users of all ages want "fast, practical, easily navegable web sites". Web sites are naturally subjective and thus not above suspicion. However, this does not prevent young people using the Internet to decide on their holidays or the middle-aged from consulting web sites after having settled on the kind of holiday and destination. In other words, Internet has become an information and purchasing centre for the majority of travellers. Younger people demand webs that are user-friendly, feature e-Commerce and that provide clear, straightforward bookings. Older travellers set greater store by personalisation, a wide range of options and links. The over-50s seek credibility, clear pricing and other factors such as maps. The best web sites provide: a virtual tour; trip customisation; personal options; the option to cancel bookings; easy booking for everything; user comments; segmentation by trip type; location maps.
2. Of the three main dimensions analysed (design, functionality, value for clients) it is value that is most closely related to a web site's overall score. This may indicate that the experts evaluating the sites were most strongly influenced by client value than by other aspects.
3. With regard to design, the web sites awarded high scores (7.68 on average) stressed aesthetics (7.61), and showed consistency between appearance, "look and feel", branding, and usability (7.61). Navigation was sound, easy and intuitive. With regard to content covering both corporate aspects and information to clients, the breadth and depth of web sites was generally low. Companies, it seems, are reluctant to reveal all. In most cases, web creation and the updating of content are outsourced, which tends to undermine the credibility of web sites. Looking to the future, such aspects may pose serious weaknesses. The quality, consistency and veracity of content will be of prime importance when Internet positioning becomes a question of semantics. A further weakness may be that web sites are not designed to be scalable, which limits their growth. In many cases, navigating a web site is a time-consuming, frustrating process.

4. There is a great deal of scope for improved functionality. This is true, for example, in making searches. In e-Commerce, the dispersion of results is important. Fully 60% of the webs studied scored under 5 and 45% scored between 1 and 3, which means half of these companies are either unwilling or unable to sell their tourist products and services on the web. In this respect, finding a technology partner plays a key role. There is a tendency to outsource the tools for making searches and presenting products. In many cases, these tools lack the company's "look and feel" and do not fit in with how it does business. The overall score given for this parameter was 6.19.
5. When it comes to personalising offers (4.54), there is a strong tendency to value process automation more highly than tailoring services to customers. In general, the scores for parameters measuring personalisation (customisation and relational marketing) are very low and there is a wide spread of responses. Almost 60% of scores are below 5. This indicates a failure to adapt sites to clients' tastes and preferences and reveals firms' failure to adopt a customer-based orientation.
6. There is also ample scope for improving security (5.75). It is hard to find and interpret companies' privacy policy.
7. With regard to value for clients, three aspects adversely affect scores: minimal customer service (4.44); the fact that firms show little interest in providing worthwhile corporate information (5.44); firms' failure to provide accurate product/service information (5.52). With regard to information on products, two factors need to be taken into account: (1) the tendency to gloss over prices and hide extras until the last step in the purchasing process; (2) the lack of decision-making tools for making purchases.
The content in terms of relevance to the target audience and to third parties scores reasonably highly (6,84). However, one should note travel agencies' poor showing in this respect (4.02%).
8. In general, greater effort is put into design (particularly when it comes to tourist destinations) than into functionality (restaurants and travel agencies fared particularly badly in this respect).
9. Of the groups studied, transport scored highest, followed by tourist destinations. Restaurants in general and travel agencies in particular scored badly, as will be seen from Tables 8a, 8b, 8c,8d and 8e. If the average of dot com companies is taken as a yardstick (this makes sense given that Internet is the *raison d'être* of such firms), the only sectors in our sample that beat the average were: sea transport; rail transport; air transport. Regions hit the average and the remaining sub-sectors fell below it. All travel agents fell below the average when it came to design, as did restaurants with regard to functionality and value for clients.
10. Recommendations for improvements applicable to all company web sites are given below:
 - a. Professionalism in drawing up web content, rather than letting content play second fiddle to the technology (which is what happens in most cases).
 - b. Increase the amount of information that is useful to clients and furnish more links to others providing added value.
 - c. Increase the amount of corporate information, facilitate contact and foster greater credibility.
 - d. Web sites should provide two-way communication – this is a key success factor in the Internet. This two-way street should be customer oriented rather than product-oriented. It would do much to boost e-commerce, reduce the importance of price, lessen consumer stress and thus facilitate purchases.
 - e. Dynamic pricing and the concomitant price war have attracted users to the Internet in droves. Once everyone uses the Internet as an information and purchasing centre, firms will have a golden

opportunity to engage in two-way communication with their target markets. Internet is not just another channel. That is why stating offers clearly and attractively is a key success factor on the web.

APPENDIX - TABLES

TABLE 1. Measurement Model

		SITE 1	
TOTAL		100%	
1 Site design		25%	
1.1	Usability	80%	
	Navigation		Easy, intuitive, complete, consistent,...
	Look & Feel		Graphic design
	Breadth		... of web content and web in relation to their theme
	Depth		... of web content and web in relation to their theme
1.2	Aesthetics	20%	
	Appearance		Aesthetic
	Clear and intuitive		Functionality of aesthetic
	Look&Feel consistent throughout the site		Aesthetic consistency throughout the site
	Consistent branding		Consistency with brand and literary style
2 Site functionality		25%	
2.1	Searching	70%	
	eCommerce		Does it allow product purchase / reservation?
	Advanced search, multiple parameters		Higher level criteria for segmenting searches
	Relevant search results		Link between answers and searches
	Robustness		Reliability, down time, lock-up...
	Speed		De congesta, de carga...
2.2	Personalisation	20%	
	Customisation		Extent to which it meets clients' wishes and tastes
	Relational mktg.		Personal orientation
2.3	Security	10%	
	Is the security and privacy policy accessible?		Is it easy to access and clearly displayed?
	Is the security and privacy policy clear?		Is it easy to interpret?
3 Value for clients		50%	
3.1	Content	30%	
	Relevant to the target?		The content's relationship with and importance to the target
	Credibility		Is it credible and demonstrable?
	Product-oriented		To what extent does it focus on the product and not on the client?
	Viral		An invitation to see third-party sites?
3.2	Product/service information	20%	
	Product coverage		Breadth and depth of the products/services offered
	Price shown and transparent		Price set out clearly and broken down (transparency)
	Product/service news		Up-to-date products and services
	Decision-making tools		Helps purchasing decisions: mash ups, geo-location, product comparisons...
	Two-way communication		User contributions, Web 2.0
3.3	Client support, access and service	35%	
	Technical manuals / instructions		Help levels
	FAQs		FAQs - coverage
	CRM		Call Centre access, Chat, Contact form, Call me back,...
	Internationalisation		Web personalization (by country, language, currency, offers, etc.)
3.5	Corporate information	15%	
	Corporate information		Info on company/chairman/board/annual report/financial information
	Media		Info for the media/info on press and media coverage
4 Overall score		0	

Source: based on Boronat & Pallarés, and Gartner Web Evaluation Tool

TABLE 2. Hotels

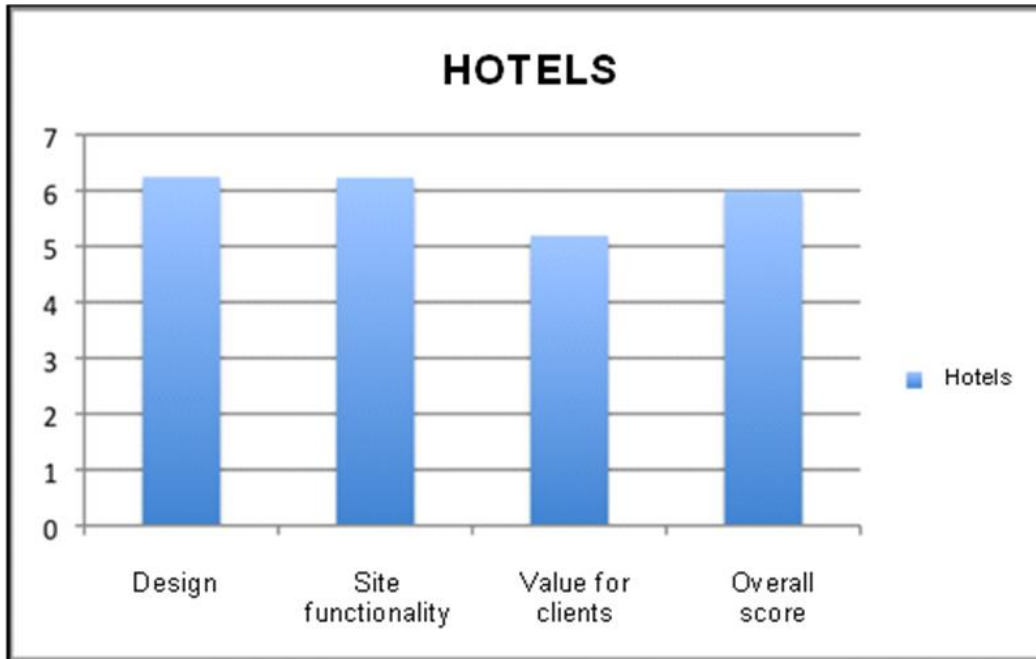


TABLE 3. Destinations

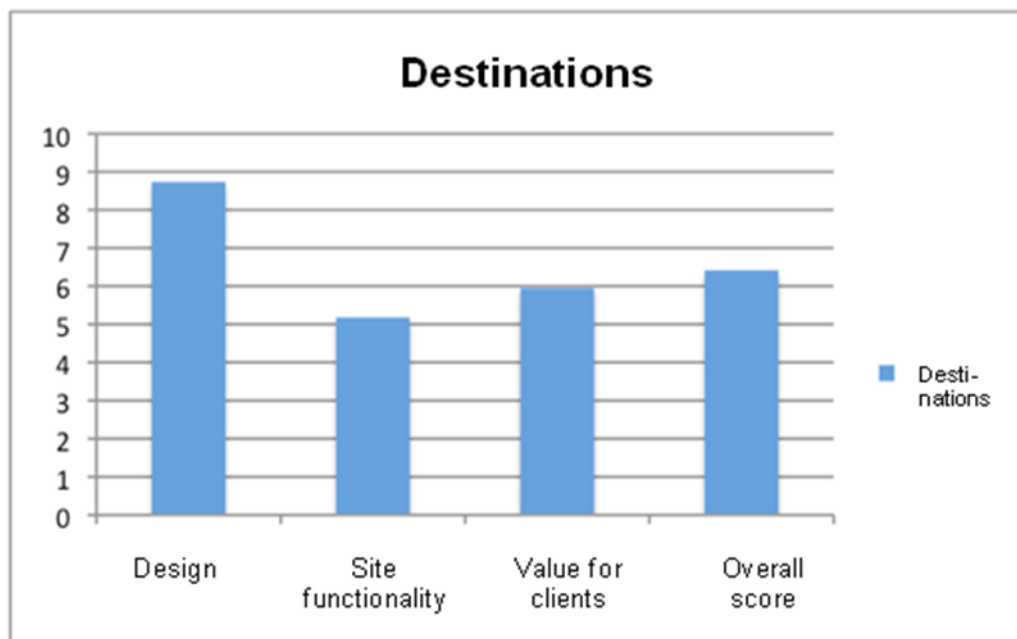


TABLE. 4 a. Traditional travel agencies

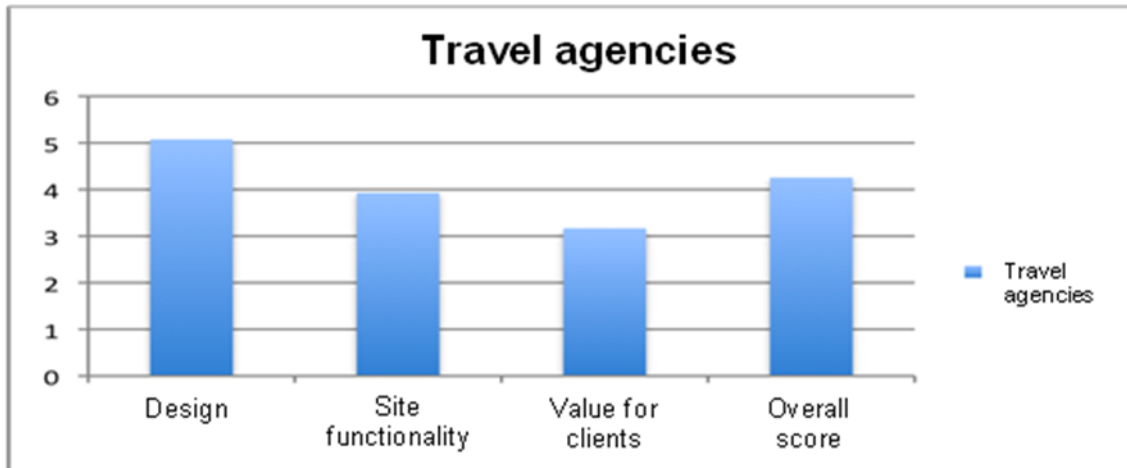


TABLE 4 b. Online travel agencies

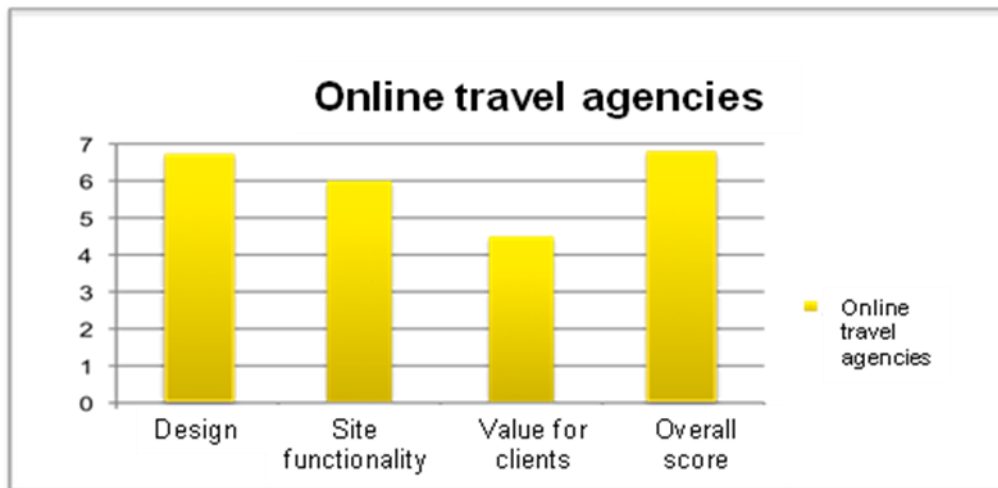


TABLE 5. Transport

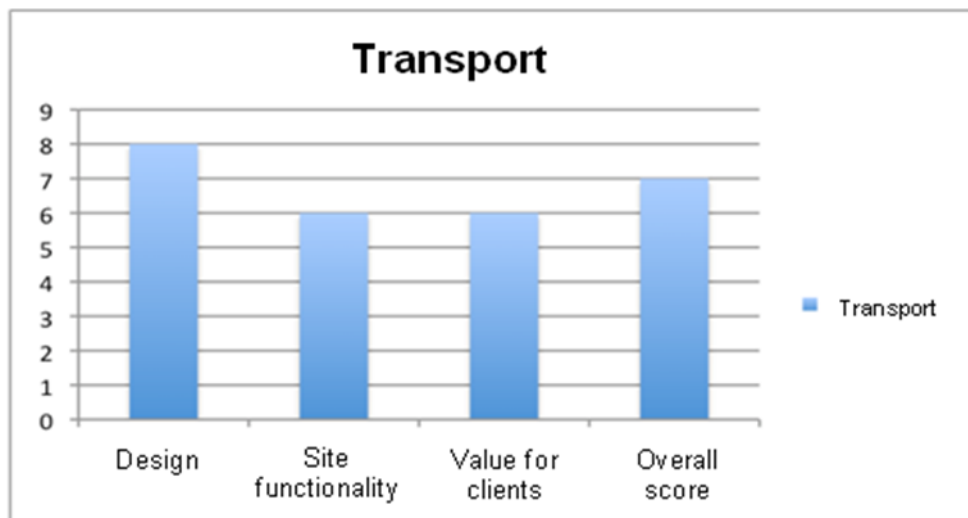


TABLE 6. Restaurants

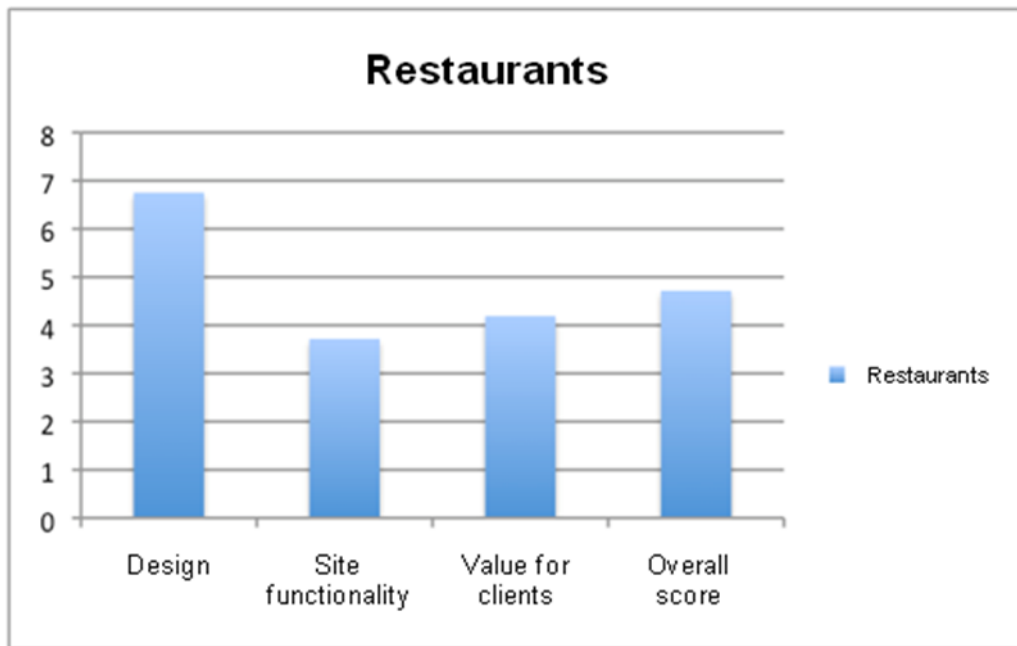


TABLE 7. Leisure

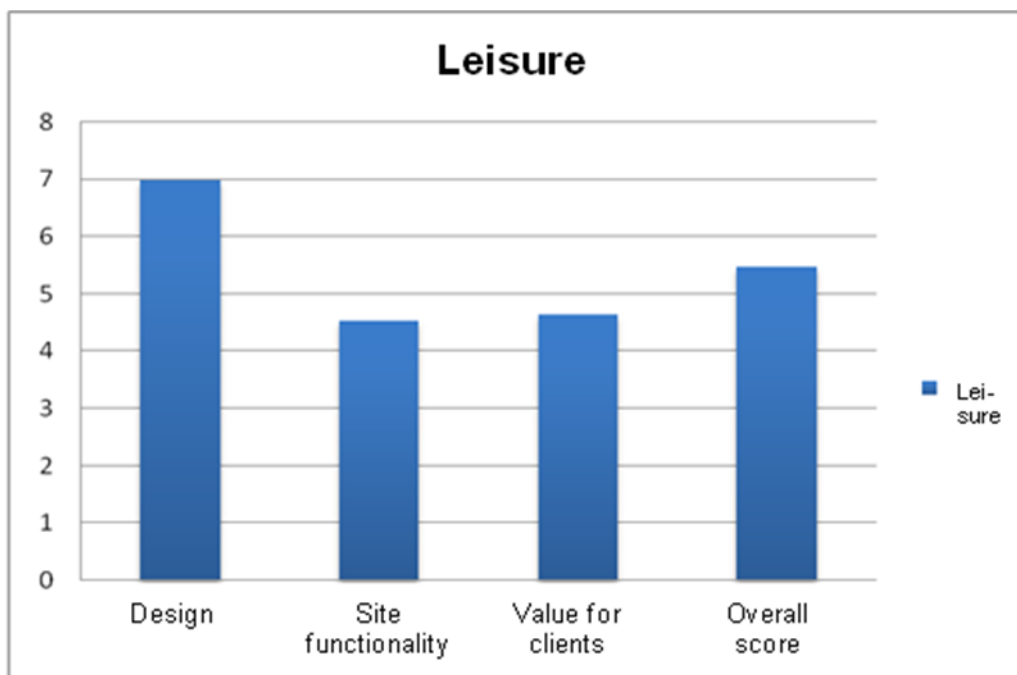


TABLE 8a: Functionality/design

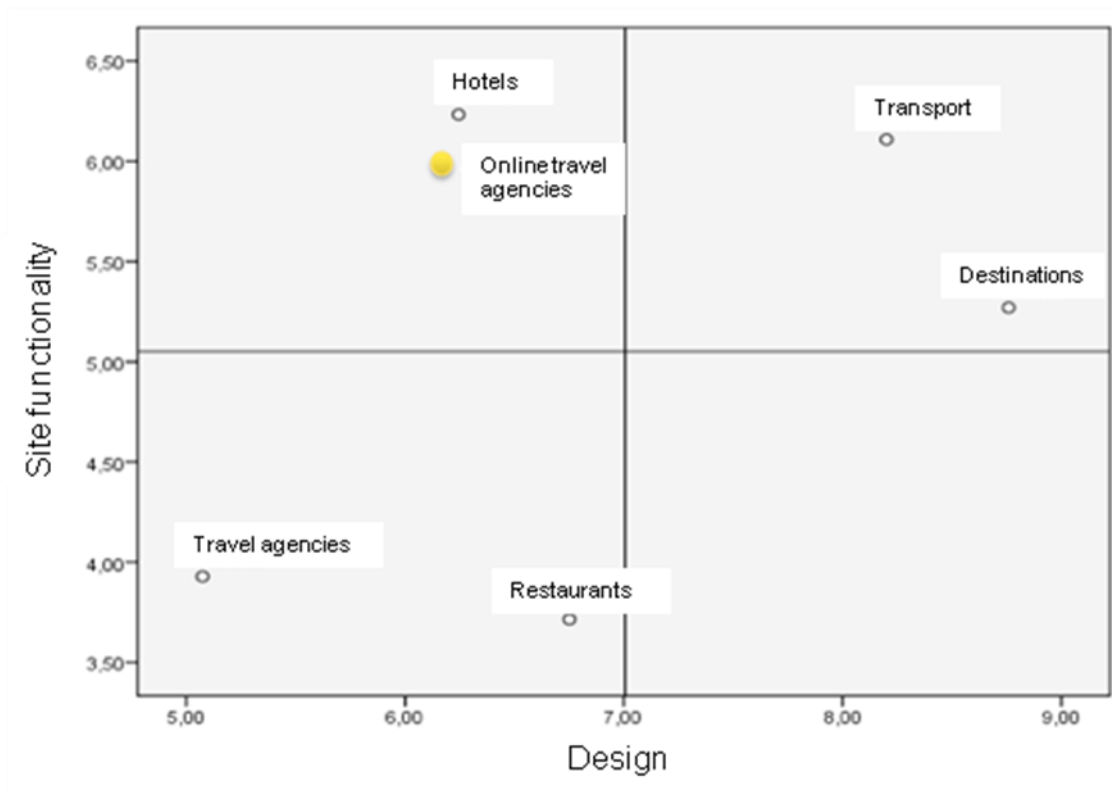


TABLE 8b: Value for clients /design

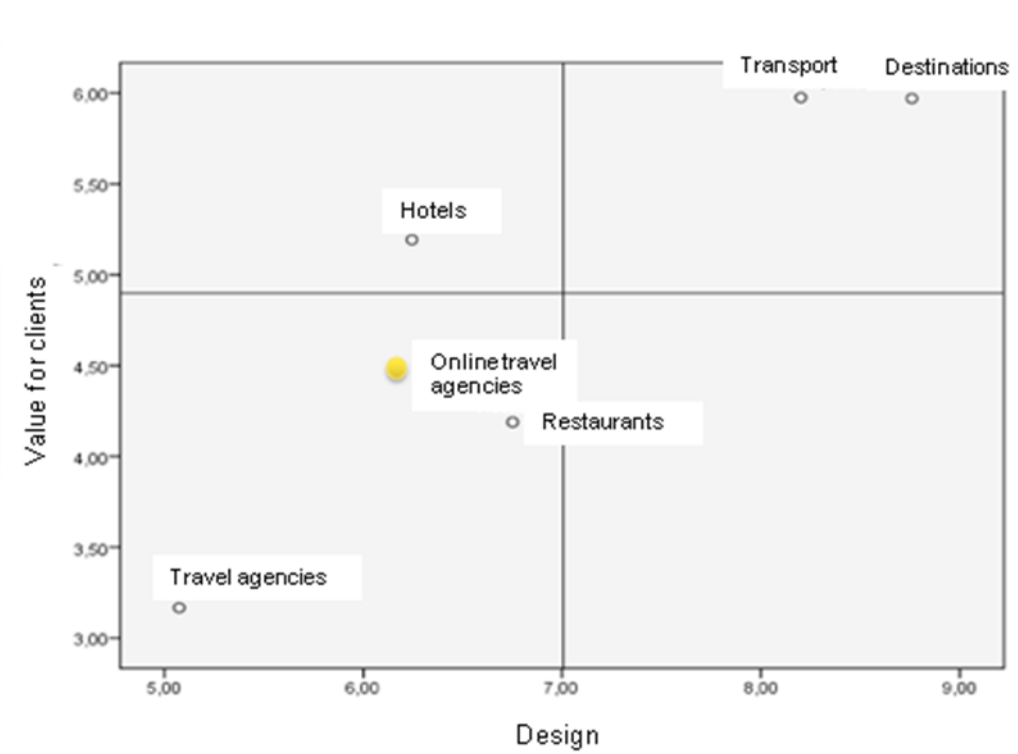


TABLE 8c: Value for clients / overall score

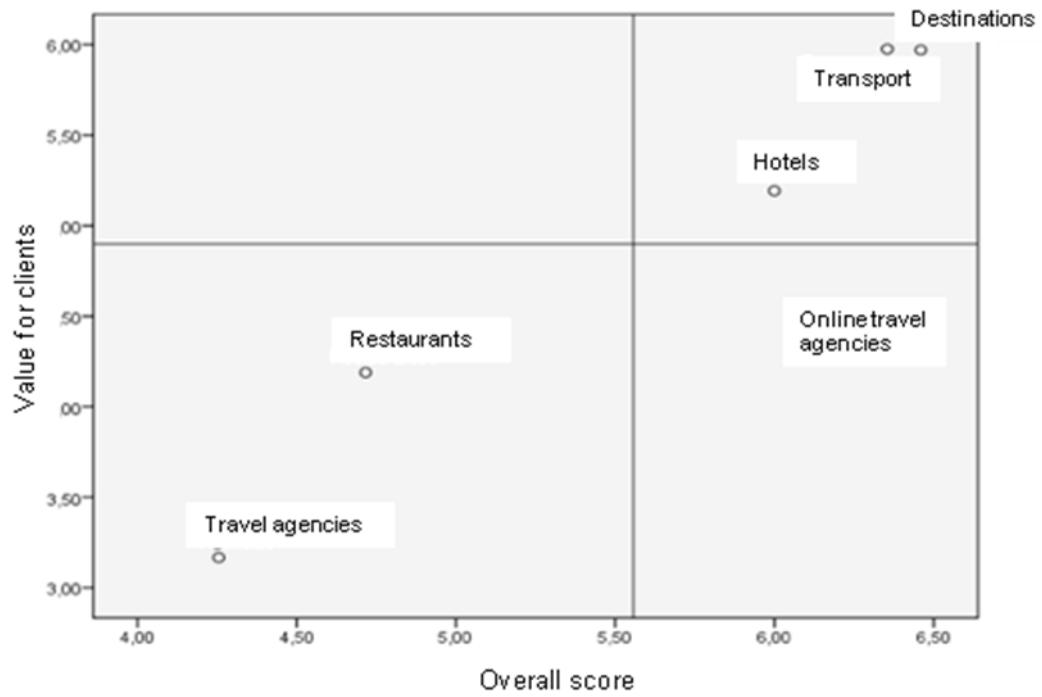


TABLE 8d: Functionality/ overall score

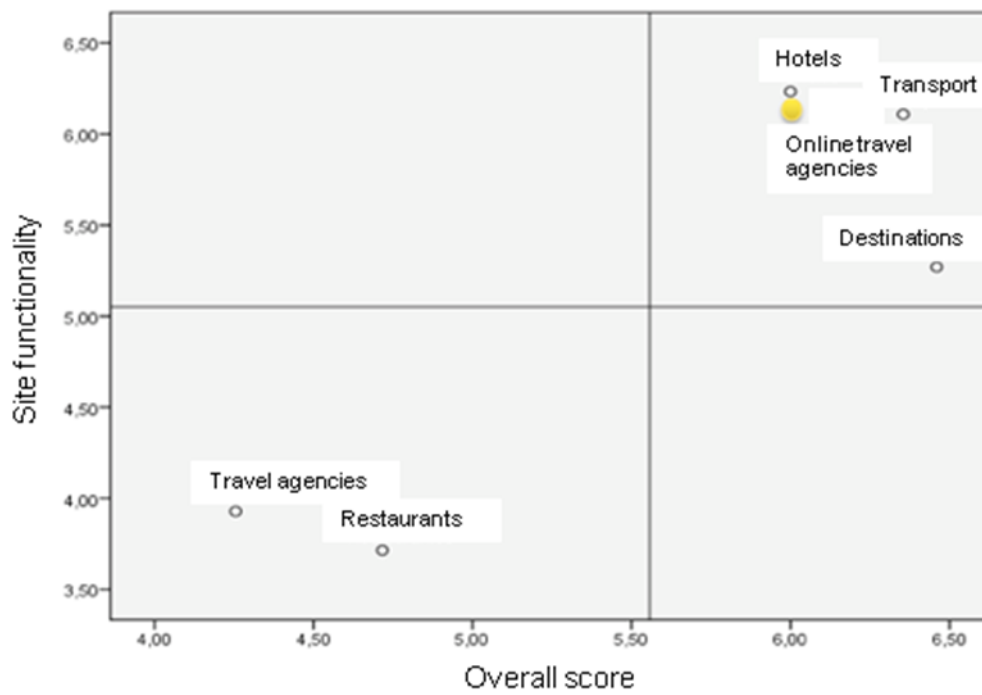
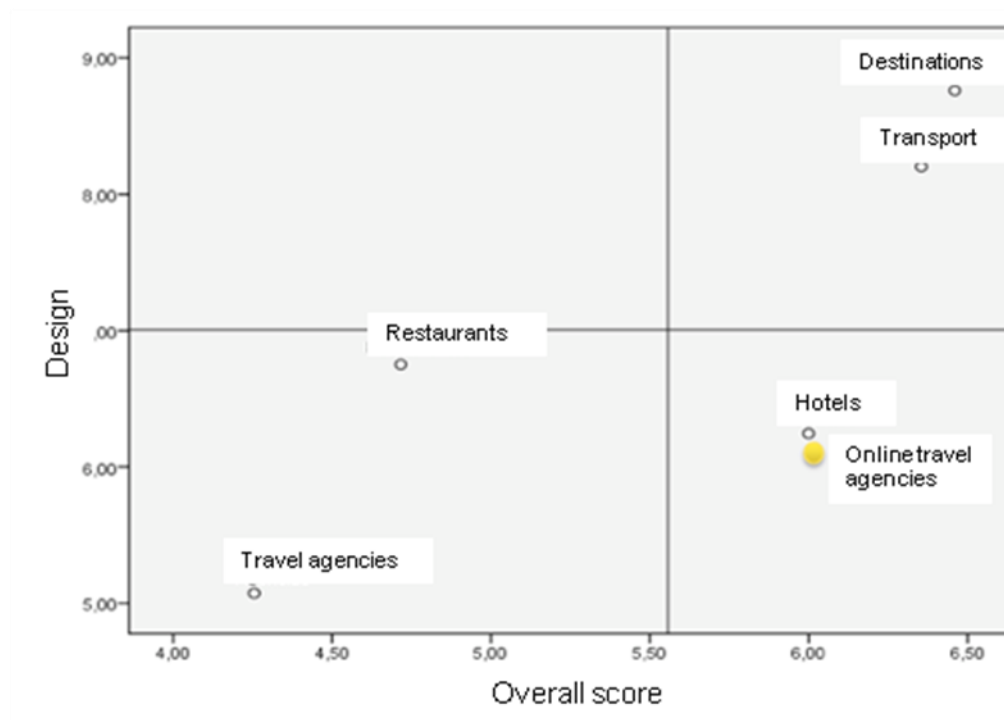


TABLE 8e: Design and overall score



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