SME website implementation factors in the hospitality industry

Groundwork for a digital marketing roadmap

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to provide an overview of the literature on how quality factors impact website implementation for small and medium-sized hospitality enterprises (SMEs). Its objective is to define and explain the relevance of these factors and synthesize them in the context of a digital space roadmap for Dubai's Vision 2020, as well as to identify potential routes to assist SME practitioners in implementation.

Design/methodology/approach – Analyses literature on website implementation in the hospitality industry in relation to relevant themes, drawing from a range of journals and relevant industry sources. A link to trends for the future is established to illustrate the groundwork for website implementation factors and the digital roadmap. Practitioner input on the review is presented to augment the findings.

Findings – The relevant aspects of SME website implementation and associated challenges are defined. Various quality-related factors such as website access, content, function and design should not be ignored by practitioners. It is suggested that these factors retain their relevance in the context of current trends, such as social, local and mobile communications. There is a need for academia and government bodies to provide comprehensive guidance to industry executives.

Practical implications – Executives in the SME domain need to ensure that they take into consideration the factors pertaining to effective website implementation presented in the study, as they will likely positively influence their ability to extend their digital strategy into the future.

Originality/value – This manuscript provides a practically oriented and engaging overview of SME website implementation factors for a wide audience and links them to newly emerging digital marketing concepts, thus attempting to fill a gap in the literature.

Keywords Online marketing, Digital roadmap, Hospitality websites, SME websites, SOLOMO, Website implementation, Hospitality marketing

Paper type Literature review

Introduction and backdrop

The role of small and medium-sized businesses in economic development and employment is significant for a majority of countries (Karanasios and Burgess, 2006). Gilmore *et al.* (2007) point out that roughly 80 per cent of worldwide development can be attributed to small and medium enterprises (SMEs), for instance in the European Union alone there are more than 20 million SMEs (European Commission, 2013). Focusing on Dubai, 42 per cent of the total value added is attributed to SMEs (Dubai SME, 2012):

more than 95 per cent of the total number of businesses in the city fall under this classification (Geronimo, 2013).

The government of Dubai has launched various initiatives such as the Dubai SME agency, which was established in 2002. Its vision is to "make Dubai a global centre of innovative small and medium-size enterprises that can constantly create new economic value for the Dubai economy" (Department of Economic Development, 2012). This agency defines SMEs as incorporating businesses with a maximum of 250 employees and revenue of no more than AED 150 million, in line with international standards (The Mohammed Bin Rashid Establishment for SME Development, 2009).

Fueled by the rights to host the Expo 2020 in Dubai, it is clear that hospitality SMEs will play a key role in achieving the Vision 2020 for Dubai's tourism; the vision aims at doubling the number of visitors from 10 million in 2012 by the start of the next decade (Edgecumbe, 2013).

In view of this, the questions explored here are as follows:

- How might SMEs contribute towards this goal?
- How could SMEs leverage the investment that the government is making by attracting a new audience via digital marketing channels?

One such opportunity arises from the globalized nature of the World Wide Web, which has allowed small companies to act on an international scale alongside much larger corporations (Elliott and Boshoff, 2009, p. 35; Quinton and Khan, 2009, p. 109). Specifically, low financial requirements, availability, targeted marketing, flexibility, reach and customer involvement are some of the key reasons for attempts by the small business sector to engage in Internet-based marketing activities. It quickly became clear that web-based promotion is essential for business success (Elliott and Boshoff, 2009, p. 35; Scaglione *et al.*, 2009, p. 625).

The business website is at the centre of such Internet-based activities and is considered the major representation and foundation of a business' online presence and thus of particular importance (Toma and Marinescu, 2012. p. 74; Kung and Zhang, 2011, p. 35). Its existence has manifested itself as an expectation among consumers. In the light of this development, the implementation of this tool for hospitality SMEs has been subject to considerable research. Significant evidence in recent studies suggests there is still a gap in practitioner understanding, particularly in the micro and small business sectors, as well as in the academic context (Line and Runyan, 2012, p. 483; Law *et al.*, 2010, p. 310; Lwin and Phau, 2013, p.19; Toma and Marinescu, 2012. p. 73). Given that the next wave of digital buzzwords such as Web 2.0/3.0, Big Data and Social, Local, Mobile (SOLOMO) has already arrived (Verret, 2009; Budd, 2009; HSMAI, 2009), this evidence is alarming, given that a good understanding of the current state of affairs in website implementation is imperative for effective adoption of the latest trends in the digital space.

Considering this gap and the widespread understanding of the Internet's importance, Porter (as quoted in Ramsey *et al.*, 2003, p. 252) commented on this crucial issue more than 10 years ago in his statement: "The key question is not whether to deploy Internet technology but 'how' to deploy it […]". This review therefore aims to synthesize the quality factors of website implementation by examining the current state of affairs in the literature to address the "how" question

– which is where smaller-sized businesses and independents often lag behind (Hashim *et al.*, 2010, p. 195).

This article reviews existing literature from academic and industry sources. It groups and presents concepts relevant to site implementation in five subsections. These website implementation factors are then linked together so as to consider the implications for relevant areas of a digital roadmap for 2020. This analysis is followed by a summary of practitioner and industry expert input. Gaps and limitations are outlined and a concluding outlook is described.

This review is different because it is not primarily intended for technology professionals and academics. Pareigyte (2013), founder of the Dubai-based digital marketing agency *Tsweaq*, used the term "MarkITer" to illustrate the cross-departmental impact of the digital shift during a recent industry presentation. This seems to be particularly relevant to the SME context, where vertical expertise within an organization is often less pronounced, warranting the need for a wider understanding of the subject in question. In line with this assessment, the paper's purpose is to allow a broad audience of hospitality practitioners and academics to evaluate their own understanding and to establish a framework for the next phase of digital growth.

Industry practice

Three main purposes of the website in the SME context have been identified in an initial observation on the level of sophistication of website implementation (Canavan *et al.*, 2007, p. 181; Sun *et al.*, 2012, p. 943). They are:

- as a communication tool about company details and offerings;
- as a mean of proactive customer engagement and market insight collection; and
- as a direct selling platform for products.

Practical obstacles in the progression through those stages faced by hospitality SMEs include technological issues, resource scarcity and general deficiencies in knowledge, but also the absence of the necessary motivation and even unawareness of the latent benefits (Chen and Zhang, 2013, p. 49). In some studies, this resulted in few tangible benefits from Internet-based efforts (Gilmore *et al.*, 2007, p. 244). The mere existence of a website does not guarantee visitors, and traffic generation has been an issue for small businesses from technical and cost perspectives (Quinton and Khan, 2009, p. 115). This was specifically shown in a study of small and medium hotels, which called for greater concern towards traffic generation in practice (Murphy and Kielgast, 2008, p. 95).

Moreover, Brown and Kaewkitipong (2009) found that the environment plays a key role in the adoption of technology. This results in a lack of homogenously defined practice (Law *et al.*, 2010, p. 310). To overcome these obstacles and the lack of universal rules that they can rely on, businesses often hire outside companies to handle their web presence. This often means that they are dependent on third-party skills, but it ensures they move beyond the most basic online functionalities, a model that is very apparent in the local environment in Dubai (Brown and Kaewkitipong, 2009). The concept of outsourcing has been analysed by Costa (2001), who has postulated three key motivators: financial savings, technological challenges and the requirement for businesses to focus on their core activities. Elliott and Boshoff (2009) argue that the latter reason (the need to focus on core activity) is particularly

key to the small business world, given the limited resources available to business owners and operators. However, there is evidence that outsourcing creates a disconnection between what the website portrays and what the business' marketing objectives actually are (Sun *et al.*, 2012).

Despite the fact that cohesive long-term strategic methodologies are resulting in superior performance for many businesses, the analysis suggests industry practice is often less formal and impromptu and hence at times ineffective and ultimately unfavourable (Culkin and Smith, 2000; Moriarty *et al.*, 2008). This further supports the need for a comprehensive review of strategic factors in website adoption in the SME sector so as to find ways to assist practitioners to adopt a more deliberate, focused and effective approach.

Literature review

Two dimensions define the setting for this study. First, the key sector for analysis is the hospitality industry. Second, the size of the businesses under investigation is limited to SMEs as per the above definition. To effectively review the literature, four key terms were identified:

(1)   small and medium enterprises;

(2)   website;

(3)   marketing; and

(4)   hospitality.

The combination of these terms dictates the search for appropriate literature via the various channels with a focus on key industry journals and publications. For each term, a number of related keywords were identified and these are shown in Table I.

The resulting set of articles was coded and grouped using a patchwork approach as outlined by Ridley (2008). The codes were then clustered via a conceptual mind map to clarify relationships and sequences and to further develop the architecture of the article (Figure 1). The all-encompassing concepts are the "Internet" and "Marketing" and these and related factors have been analysed by several authors (Jones *et al.*, 2003). Meng (2009) specifically looked at core activities within a broader e-commerce context, e.g. conducting online-based business and here, the website was considered as the main concept.

The literature uses several approaches for classification of the concepts. For example, Fry *et al.* (2004) identified three elements that contribute to web presence success:

Micro and small enterprise	MSE, SME, small, medium, micro, entrepreneur, start up, business, enterprise
Website	Internet, E-business, online, web, search engine, links, offline, URL, E-commerce, E-marketing, IT, technology, analytics, design, navigation, HTML
Marketing	Marketing, selling, promotion, advertisement, distribution, awareness, channel, SEM, SEO
Hospitality	Hotel, food, beverage, event, catering, accommodation, hostel, restaurant, bar, conference, B&B, resort, tourism

Table I.
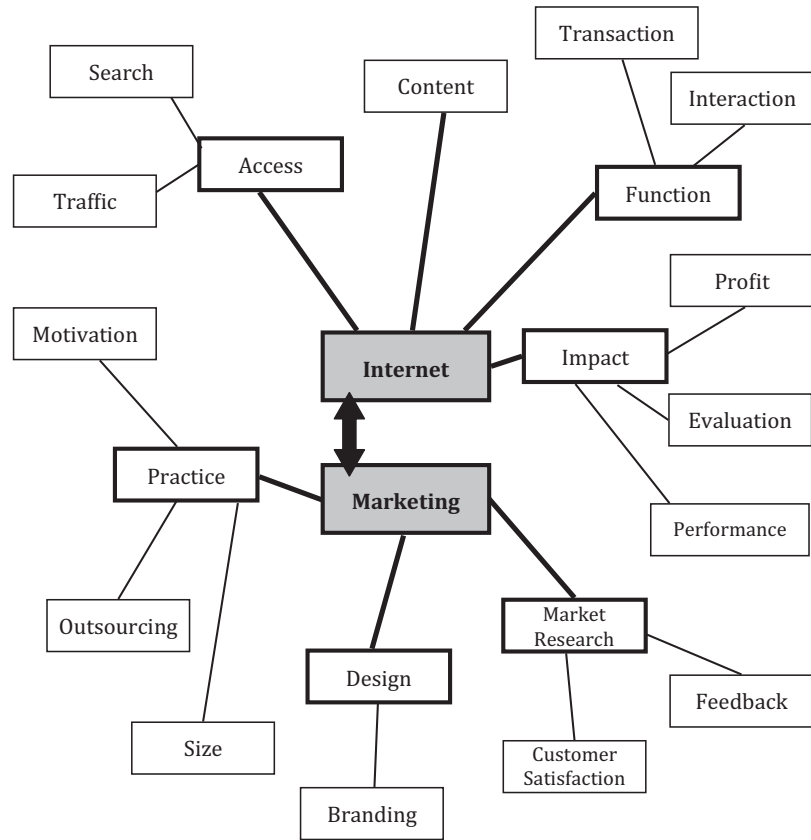Key terms and associated keywords used in the search process

Figure 1.
Mind map capturing the key concepts of the topic area and their relationships

(1) provision, i.e. does a website with Universal Resource Locater (URL) exist;

(2) accessibility, which refers to the user being able to find it; and

(3) facilities provision, which concerns the content and features provided.

Morrison *et al.* (2004) analysed a website evaluation model on customer satisfaction by Mills and Morrison (2003) and looked at three areas:

(1) interface, which heavily focuses on design and access aspects;

(2) perceived quality, which mainly discusses the content and function of the site; and

(3) perceived value, which is closely related to the product on offer.

Comparable classification can be found in other studies, for example a differentiation is made between functionality and content (Canavan *et al.*, 2007). Ease of use links the above function and the design terms (Law and Huang, 2006). Factors used by Martin (2004) include considerations like accuracy (e.g. content), loading time (e.g. function) and "feel" (e.g. design).

A synthesis of this categorization can be found in Figure 2. The following sections look at each of the areas in more detail.

Access

A question that is often raised in this stream of research is how do potential customers find and access the site. It is obvious that no matter how sophisticated and well-implemented a website is, it becomes superfluous if it has no visitors and hence no return on investment for the firm (Law and Huang, 2006). A classification of website access methods by users is helpful. One suggested approach is: (1) entering via a known URL (2) via search engines and (3) via links from other sites (Fry *et al.*, 2004). Similarly, Namkung *et al.* (2007) argue that search, frequently visited pages and direct access via the URL are possible access patterns. These patterns can be volatile; in particular, the search engine channels have shifted in importance, with Google still retaining its top position (Whitney, 2010) and social media channels rising as an additional source for traffic.

Studies have advocated search engine optimization as the most important factor to be considered in traffic creation for business websites, based on research showing that users rarely go beyond the first page of results when conducting an online search (Quinton and Khan, 2009). Sander (2008) provides a reason for this in the hospitality context. He argues that the first information source for business and leisure travellers alike is a search engine. Within the search engine, marketing domain users are directed to a business' website either by "organic" search or paid ("sponsored") search results (Jansen and Mullen, 2008; Murphy and Kielgast, 2008). Organic search engine optimization encompasses certain methodologies which result in the engines' algorithms placing one's website high in its search results. The methodologies used to accomplish this goal include both optimizations in the website code and content (including meta tags and keyword usage) and techniques to increase reciprocal "backlinks" from other sites or social media channels (Toma and Marinescu, 2012. p. 76).

Quinton and Khan (2009) discussed organic search engine optimization via backlinks and in their "website traffic generator model", they concluded that a combination of directory entries, e.g. building links via submitting the website's URL into online business directories, and press release distribution, e.g. working with partner feeds
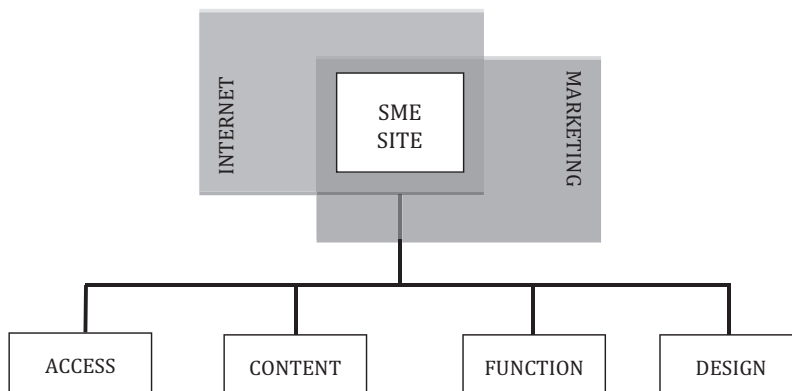

Figure 2.
Categorization of the quality factors affecting website implementation

reporting business news, is an effective and cost-efficient tool. It is interesting to note that these methods can enhance search engine results, but they are also beneficial in terms of users clicking their way to the SME website from those directory links. Hence the concept of back-linking also gives users a way to access the business website directly via other channels.

Sponsored search entails paying for ads to be displayed high in search engine results. The advertiser is usually charged either each time a user clicks on the ad (pay-per-click model) and is directed to the desired site, or each time the ad is displayed on the search engines' results or on partner pages (pay-per-impression model). The appeal of the concept is the sophisticated targeting opportunities and avoidance of the required technical expertise and inherent issues associated with organic search engine optimization. However, it has been widely criticized – especially given the cost of fraudulent clicks (Jansen *et al.*, 2009). Specifically in the context of small businesses, it has been postulated that their ability to compete with larger corporations and budgets is limited in this field (Quinton and Khan, 2009). There is also some contradicting evidence on user perception of sponsored ads. While Jansen and Mullen's (2008) review concludes that users treated them the same way as generic results, Quinton and Khan (2009) on the other hand argue that users pay less attention to sponsored ads.

To achieve direct traffic via users entering the URL, it is important that businesses actually register a domain name. It is advisable to use an address that is easy to remember, e.g. avoiding dashes or unusual spelling. This allows users to potentially find the site simply by knowing the name of the company they are looking for. Furthermore, it is suggested that an effective approach is to strategically place the URL on company collateral such as brochures to direct potential customers to the website (Canavan *et al.*, 2007). Murphy and Scharl (2007) have looked at the URL choice in more detail from a cultural perspective, asserting that .com domains tend to support globalized aspects of the Internet and that local domains such as .ae can be important for cultures rating high on collectivism and masculinity, a subject that would benefit from further analysis in the context of the UAE.

The above analysis allows categorization of consumers' methods to find and access websites in three segments, outlined in Figure 3.

Content

Website content is defined as "any type of communication material" and is the primary reason for users to visit a site (Namkung *et al.*, 2007). Law and Bai (2008) advocated that a reason for users not to stay on a website is weak content. A number of researchers include this aspect in their evaluation criteria for websites (Canavan *et al.*, 2007). The subcategories of content criteria in relation to website quality are presented in Table II.

While providing the appropriate range and level of detail of information in the above fields, another substantial point is the accuracy of this content, as it relates to the impression of quality for the end-user (Namkung *et al.*, 2007). This becomes particularly important in the online world as a means of establishing a trustworthy relationship with web surfers. The tangible aspect of the product is significantly less prominent in web-based item display, making this a critical factor (Chen and Zhang, 2013). Moreover, it is important to ensure up-to-date data and recent content to avoid displaying a careless image (Küster and Vila, 2011). Specifically, continual maintenance of the site to ensure a fresh look is echoed as important (Zipkin, 2008). These elements were identified by
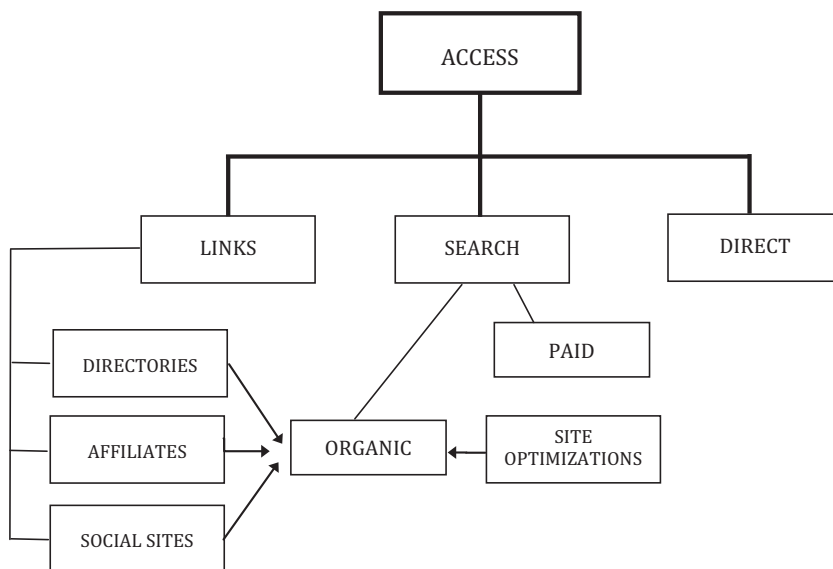
Figure 3.
Sub-concepts relevant to
the access component in
quality website
implementation

Business information	Canavan *et al.*, 2007, p. 187; Küster and Vila, 2011, p. 137; Moreo *et al.*, 2007, p. 40; Sandy and Burgess, 2003, p. 38	Company-related information
Contact information	Canavan *et al.*, 2007, p. 187; Law and Bai, 2008, p. 395; Fry *et al.*, 2004, p. 306	
Product information	Canavan *et al.*, 2007, p. 187; Küster and Vila, 2011, p. 13; Law and Bai, 2008, p. 395; Fry *et al.*, 2004, p. 306	Product-related information
Online catalogue/listings	Canavan *et al.*, 2007, p. 187; Fry *et al.*, 2004, p. 306	
Purchase information	Küster and Vila, 2011, p. 13; Law and Bai, 2008, p. 395	
Pictures	Canavan *et al.*, 2007, p. 187	
Awards, testimonials, reviews	Canavan *et al.*, 2007, p. 187	Supplementary information
FAQ/product usage directions	Canavan *et al.*, 2007, p. 187; Moreo *et al.*, 2007, p. 40; Sandy and Burgess, 2003, p. 38	
Non-core product information	Bickerton *et al.*, 2000, p. 197; Hsu *et al.*, 2004, p. 89	

Table II.
Types of website content
presented in the literature

Ramanathan (2010) as requiring a need for the person in charge of the content to be closely familiar with product characteristics.

The use of quality audio-visual content has a number of merits when taking the mostly intangible products the industry deals with into account. Larger hotel corporations are recognizing the impact of high-quality imagery and its effect on performance and hence invest heavily in this factor, thus suggesting the issue should be on the radar for smaller companies as well (Firestone, 2011). Images have been confirmed to be beneficial for user assessment of the product on offer, as they transmit an impression text alone

cannot convey. However, geographical and cultural specialties need particular attention in this matter (HSMAI, 2010), such as sensitivity to the local religion in the context of Dubai. The next level is the use of video, which offers greater tangibility for services. The quality of media is especially important so as to avoid a detrimental product image, resulting in potentially high budget requirements out of reach for small businesses (HSMAI, 2010). Figure 4 provides a summary of the content elements.

Function
There is some indistinctness in terms of defining the "function" element of websites, as authors have at times described the functional aspects synonymously and interchangeably with the term "usability" (Namkung *et al.*, 2007). Law and Bai (2008) described information on the site as functional elements and they categorize issues such as navigation and design under the usability umbrella. More common is the usage of function as criteria for features present on the website (Canavan *et al.*, 2007).

The features of small business websites are described in stages by several authors. While the initial step is the "electronic brochure" feature, the consecutive phases are typically more interactive and sophisticated in nature. Küster and Vila (2011) call this the transition from the informative to the relational website. As such, the ability of the customer to contact the business via the site is viewed as important (Moreo *et al.*, 2007), for instance via e-mail, phone and possibly chat functions (Ramanathan, 2010). Timely and correct responses are critical considerations, in particular during after-sales enquiries, for instance (Morrison *et al.*, 2004).

The subsequent advancement of functionality was identified as direct purchases via the site. This includes computerized ordering systems and a payment gateway. Ramanathan (2010) identified the payment process and associated privacy concerns when dealing with personal information as a satisfier in his e-commerce success criteria analysis. Security was found to be a substantial deciding factor for consumers in online transaction and should thus be taken seriously by SME website planners (Chen and Zhang, 2013).
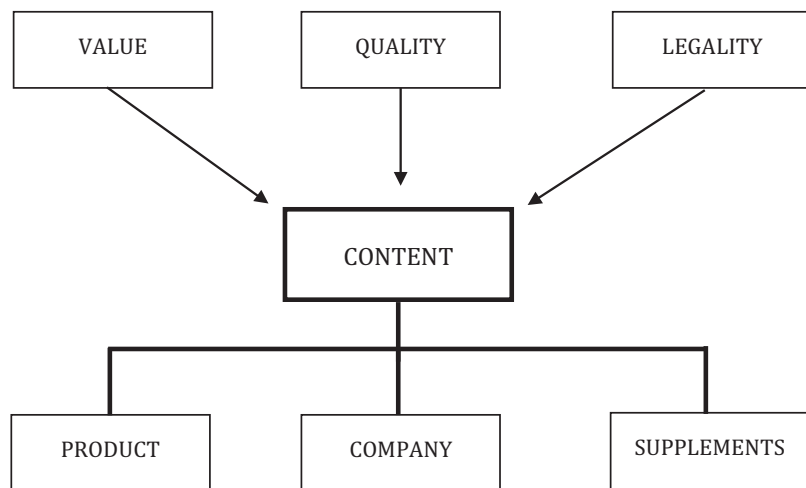

Figure 4.
Sub-concepts relevant to the content area of website implementation

At a higher level, personalization and the identification of frequent customers, for instance via loyalty programmes, enriches the ordering process and value for the consumer (Taylor and Murphy, 2004). Lee and Cranage (2010, p. 2) have analysed this issue in more detail, quoting Ho and Tam as defining personalization as "the right content to the right person in the right format at the right time". They found it useful to serve filtered website content that is only relevant to the specific user. However, they clearly postulate a need for protecting personal information required to customize the website experience.

These more sophisticated features of websites were described as the transformation from pure marketing to a sales channel. In their study on website implementation in the Irish specialty food sector, Canavan *et al.* (2007) observed three key differentiating factors with regards to the characteristics of these two channels:

(1) the age of the website, as sales channel sites were opened earlier;

(2) the cost, with sales channel pages averaging eight times more expensive; and

(3) the use of an outside web designer, as all sites with sales features were developed by third-party companies as opposed to less than three-quarter of the sites without such a function.

These indicators suggest that sales channel sites require greater experience, investment and technical expertise, making this aspect a key issue in particular for small and medium businesses. When synthesizing the above factors, Figure 5 describes the considerations SME businesses need to take into account in terms of the functionality of their website:

Design
It has to be noted that design factors were sometimes treated under the broader umbrella of usability in combination with functionality and content-related issues and this fostered an interlinked view of these concepts (Law and Bai, 2008). The importance and significance of design is evident in a number of factors, including brand building and
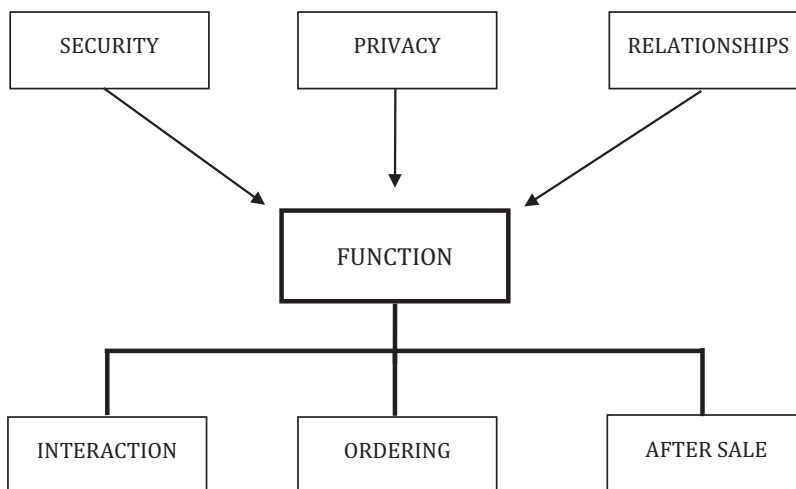
Figure 5.
Sub-concepts pertaining
to the functional elements
of websites

awareness, emphasis of content and capturing consumer interest. Namkung *et al.* (2007) divide design into three categories based on coding paradigms: aesthetics, navigation and organization.

Aesthetical characteristics include, for example, colours, symmetries, font and space usage and the supporting use of unique effects like drop shadows and animations. These individual aspects have to be considered in more detail as, for example, by HSMAI (2010) in terms of the colour dimension. Specific selections can enhance and communicate brand personalities and distinguish elements on the page. Keeping in mind human associations drawn with certain colours and their varying interpretation among different cultures, it is essential to consider whether they communicate the intended message. This factor plays a particularly important role in the multicultural environment in the UAE. Such aspects were described as the "e-scape" (van Birgelen *et al.*, 2005), the online equivalent to the servicescape in the classic consumer encounter. The importance of this is mentioned in more detail by Opoku *et al.* (2007), who utilized dimensions of brand personality to evaluate how this personality was translated into website design by SME restaurants using a perceptual map. This can provide some guidance as to how SMEs can utilize website design to emphasize their ability to create unique experiences.

The above aesthetical aspects in turn link to navigation of the website, defined as the way users access sections on the site via easy link choices – a key component of design (Zviran *et al.*, 2005, p. 161). Cunliffe as quoted in Namkung *et al.* (2007, p. 81) cites research reports claiming possible revenue losses in websites with transactional capabilities caused by inadequate navigation. Moreover, it was found that suitable aesthetics positively relate to the degree to which users are able to find the desired information. This practice can enhance user perception of both the site's quality and accuracy (van Birgelen *et al.*, 2005). Aesthetic considerations cannot be treated separately from navigational issues. For instance, font formatting can not only influence brand perception but also facilitate a hierarchical and ordered layout to ease comprehensibility (HSMAI, 2010). Further factors concerning navigation are listed by Moreo *et al.* (2007) in their criteria for website analysis: the existence, consistency and indication of current page of the navigation bar is considered relevant, as well as the provision of a permanent "Home" button.

The content and path to access has further implications for the organization in terms of its web presence, also referred to as "structure" (van Birgelen *et al.*, 2005). Placement of items on the site plays a key role, as evidenced by eye tracker studies depicting the areas visitors focus their attention on (Safko and Brake, 2009) and the impact of browser window size (Google, 2011). This is particularly important in the context of users visiting the site via a mobile device with a smaller screen. Implementing search features on sites with a considerable amount of content was found to be a relevant factor in terms of enhancing usability (Moreo *et al.*, 2007). Figure 6 depicts an overview of design consideration in website implementation as identified by the literature.

Monitoring and measuring success
Some of the identified concepts were not directly attributable to the deployment of websites. Rather, they were related to post-implementation and after-sales tasks and performance evaluation. Once a site has been developed in line with the above
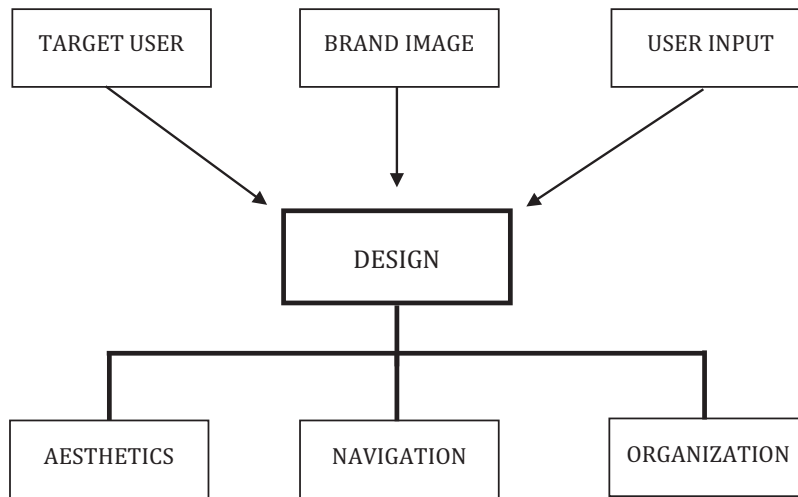
Figure 6.
Design considerations in
website implementation

considerations, monitoring its performance from a business perspective is imperative to assess whether the site's impact is in line with wider strategic objectives (Hsu *et al.*, 2004). Law *et al.* conclude that there is currently no universally agreed monitoring framework and advocate the need to seek industry and user input.

Meyerson and Scarborough (2008) refer to generating revenue from visitors (via sales conversion) as a key measurement. This requires the collection of appropriate data via transactional websites. These data offer several possible ways to improve a website in this area, ranging from factors relating to design and content to strategic tools such as bundle offers.

In terms of further quantitative measurement, Hudson and Gilbert (2006) distinguish between the number of times the site is visited, the number of unique visitors and the total of page views. A further relevant metric is the amount of time users spend on the site. The interpretation of these numbers has been described by Chiang *et al.* (2009). For instance, the number of visitors implies a level of general awareness of the site, and as such relates closely to the access issues described above. Zhou (2004) suggests more detailed analysis of traffic sources such as by country or referring sites and the possibility to track peak visitor times or days to maximize site efficiency. It can also be beneficial to track the path users take on the site prior to making a purchase action or before leaving the site. This gives insights into the effectiveness of content and navigation (Price and Safer, 2010). Ultimately, these findings from regular reviews need to be applied in an iterative approach to maximize the return on resources dedicated to the site.

The above aspects of access, content, function, design and post-implementation monitoring and iteration together outline the scope of quality factors SMEs need to consider when implementing websites. This leads on to the question as to how an understanding of these factors can be utilized effectively in the context of newly emerging trends in the digital marketing world. The following section outlines the key trend areas that can tie in with the findings from the review in terms of the path towards a digital roadmap for the SME space in the context of Dubai's Tourism Vision for 2020.

Implications for the digital roadmap

When looking at the wider digital area in the SME context, the academic perspective is still in its infancy stage – see, for example, Chen and Zhang (2013, p. 43), who argue that research efforts are trailing behind practical needs. However, industry sources have identified a number of emerging agenda issues for the digital space. For example, a cluster of upcoming trends that is referred to frequently is the aforementioned SOLOMO, which bundles key concepts together.

Social media component

The increasing relevance of social media is unquestionable in the online world. The direction of browsers to an SME site via social media channels and how this impacts user search patterns is vital for SMEs, but requires further analysis (Jansen and Mullen, 2008). O'Reilly and Sohn (2011) investigated the usage of Facebook by hotel companies and found a shift from the World Wide Web revolving around search to a social media-focused environment, which has significant impact on how users find and access business websites. There is some discussion about the integration of social media with hospitality websites, allowing users to share the information in their network (Estis-Green, 2008) and engaging with them on an emotional level rather than a product-based level (Verret, 2009).

A research summit held at Cornell University focused on social media and its use within the hospitality industry. A summary of this conference was provided by The Center for Hospitality Research (Withiam, 2011). Conference participants agreed that a comprehensive strategy of customer engagement must include social media such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Flickr, etc. As for the role of social media in hospitality and tourism, Lorraine Sileo of PhoCusWright gave a presentation at the research summit about its increasing influence on hospitality and tourism. Sixty-six per cent of all travellers are users of Facebook, and they are using it to search for travel-related information. According to her research, Facebook referrals are far more likely to convert into bookings than referrals from travel review sites. Most social media allows for complex two-way communications with multiple customers. Therefore, one of its biggest advantages compared to other forms of marketing is that customers are more likely to share their likes and dislikes, which can be used to design effective responses or marketing campaigns. Two significant challenges were identified: maintaining the social media connections that have been created by not mishandling them and being able to keep up with customers as they move forward due to advances in the technology. The information flow between users in the social media context is a second stream of marketing information on the web in addition to the company-facilitated channels (Ney, 2010). Chiang et al. (2009) have identified that it can have considerable impact on website marketing performance.

It can be anticipated that this development will be further amplified by the growth and diversification of social media sites in the future. Consequently, incorporating the broader concept of online marketing and specifically tailored website design for hospitality SMEs is of the utmost importance, but has not yet happened (Line and Runyan, 2012, p. 483; Barnes et al., 2012). So far, the use of social media in SMEs is largely intuitive in nature and has not been strategically incorporated within a broader digital strategy (Durkin et al., 2013, p. 20).

Local
Location-based services have received less direct exposure in comparison to their social and mobile peers. This may be attributed to the fact they often represent a synergy between the two areas. There is, however, no doubt that localization-based applications have shown some significant promises and end-user attention, evidenced by the growth many of the associated services have experienced (Yu *et al.*, 2013). The raison d'être of these services can be summarized into one main purpose: they provide consumers with information triggered by their physical location. For instance, this can include communication about current offers in a restaurant when a potential guest walks by with their smartphone and the appropriate application. There is some early research on the perceived value of these services among consumers, which indicated they value them for emotional purposes rather than functional benefits (Yu *et al.*, 2013, p. 722). There is also evidence that the use of location-based advertisement has positive impact on a user's intention to make a purchase decision (Kung and Zhang, 2011, p. 35).

It may be argued that location-based services fall under what has been described as the semantic web, e.g. digital technology that understands the context of the user's action and can customize its behaviour to fulfil the user's needs accordingly. For example, presenting a different restaurant menu when a user searches in the evening as opposed to during lunch time (HSMAI, 2009). SMEs often rely on their ability to provide personalized experiences and these possibilities can provide further advancements towards increased sensitivity of each specific customer's needs, particularly in a diversified environment like Dubai.

Mobile technologies
The third additional development that has not yet been evident in the small business hospitality literature but is certainly of increasing significance is the expansion of the mobile web sector. Mobile broadband availability via smartphones is expected to grow threefold from 1.6 billion connections in 2012 to 5.1 billion by 2017 (Jones *et al.*, 2013). Businesses in the hospitality industry can now provide a good user experience and full-featured functionality via mobile devices (Christodoulidou *et al.*, 2013). This requires SMEs to consider integration of this trend into their marketing mix by assessing their customers' needs and usage patterns and implementing mobile applications or a compatible site if appropriate.

With regards to the operant implementation of websites, this would encompass the development of mobile-optimized sites (Starkov and Safer, 2011). If the SME decides to pursue this task, it needs to design the website so that content can be displayed on a smaller screen and used with touch interaction. Images should be adjusted in size to reduce download time (Post, 2010).

The opportunities to interact with customers while they are on the move are manifold and possibilities such as push notifications have opened up new ways of marketing and communications. While it is not yet clear how this will impact hospitality SMEs, the ambition to making access to information and services more efficient for consumers on the go will certainly have to be on the radar (Budd, 2009). It has already been shown that trusting the provider and content of mobile communication is a key factor for consumers. This links back to the relevance of these factors in the context of website implementation (Kung and Zhang, 2011, p. 35).

Big data

Collection and effective management and use of customer data are a fourth element of the roadmap for the digital marketing future. The areas of interest here include real-time data, linked data and open data (HSMAI, 2009). Real-time data allow companies to instantly react to customer and market forces. Linked data enable the connection of previously unrelated information to gather new insights. Open data promote the availability of data without any owner and associated regulatory mechanisms, a point that could be particularly relevant for SMEs, as it would reduce competitive advantages larger corporations have.

There are a number of consequences that arise from this trend, such as the semantic web, enabling searches to deliver result for natural language queries by using artificial intelligence to understand human language (Budd, 2009). The increased availability of user data allows digital marketers to customize experience, such as serving specific content based on the prior actions of a customer across multiple channels by recognizing their patterns.

As alluded to in the functional discussion on website implementation, the collection and use of data has impacts on security and privacy measures that need to be in place. Understanding of this factor will benefit SMEs wishing to utilize advancements in data collection. Finally, data collection, similar to the early attempts of website creation in the SME space, can only have positive impacts if effectively utilized. Practitioners need to establish strategies to utilize the information they intend to collect for the customer's and thus the business' advantage (Hadley, 2013).

Synthesis

So in what way will the understanding of website deployment prepare practitioners and industry for the next phase of a digital roadmap? Each of the overarching areas identified in the review of website implementation factors will be impacted by these developments. The access aspect of website implementation closely relates to increased mobility of Internet access and visitors finding websites by browsing social media channels. The content element is undergoing transformation as user-generated content adds a second stream of communication via social media channels. Functionality will need to be tailored around the local aspects to customize the presentation of business information based around the geographic location of the user, not only in terms of their country of origin but their current physical position. Design of web-based experiences is changing rapidly to adapt to mobile devices and current trends and usage types.

Furthermore it is deemed important to take an integrated approach across all channels to establish a synergetic message with the audience (Starkov and Safer, 2011, pp. 4). On the reverse side, the simple reproduction of offline marketing efforts into the online world is not sufficient to succeed on the web. Rather, design, message and navigation should be replicated consistently to reflect values that enhance consumer trust. This required SMEs to be on board across their entire operation rather than being isolated to IT or marketing. The resource-based view by Elliott and Boshoff (2009, p. 44) finds that the online success alone becomes immaterial if small businesses lack the

appropriate skills and means to build upon it in their traditional operation. This results in an updated Figure 7 that illustrates how these channels need to sit at the same level as the website and an interlinked approach will maximize the effectiveness of all channels in the marketing process.

Practitioner opinion

To validate the findings of this review, four industry executives with significant digital marketing expertise and with direct or indirect contact to SMEs in the hospitality space were invited to comment on the manuscript. They gave suggestions on future avenues and voiced their personal concerns with regards to knowledge gaps and how to best address them. The input was collated in an informal manner via personal conversations, phone calls and written communication and focused on three areas:

(1) relevance of the website implementation factors;

(2) their significance on the digital roadmap; and

(3) suggestions for industry, academia and policymakers in the context of Dubai.

It was generally confirmed that the factors relevant for website implementations are well-represented in this review. There are gaps among practitioners in Dubai in many of the areas discussed, which are often addressed by outsourcing to third parties. This results in the aforementioned challenges around translating business requirement into a successful website. A very apt quote validating the premise of this research around the importance of understanding website implementation factors before moving on to future developments was given by Saahil Mehta, Managing Director of ResNet World:

Hospitality SMEs are talking to me about the digital trends for future-but they are often not capable of using the basic tools available today.
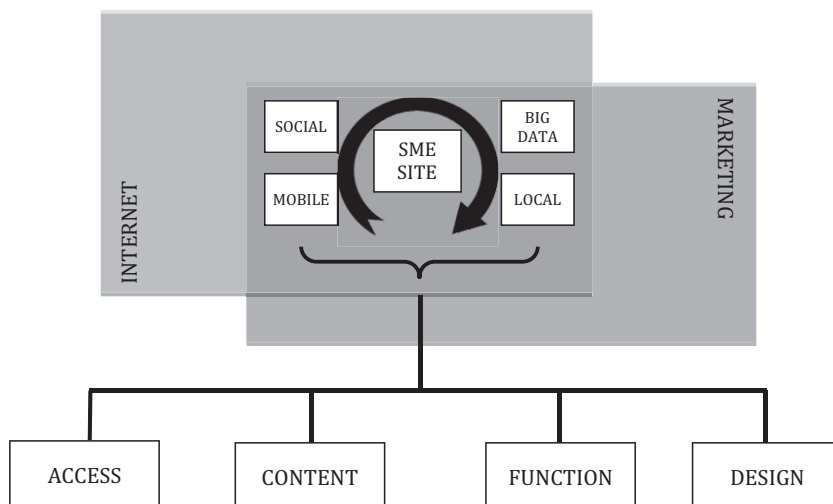

Figure 7.
Updated categorization of the quality factors affecting website implementation including multichannel web presence

Furthermore, the relevance of a non-IT-focused approach to the subject was endorsed by comments around the requirement for collaboration within the organization when considering the digital marketing element of the business. Handing over this task to the relatively isolated hands of the IT person or department will result in failure to incorporate the business objectives into the implementation process, thus a wider buy-in and understanding is essential. This also aligns with the suggested need to align online and offline activities with consistency in content and voice.

Looking at the digital trends outlined in the review, mobile and social media were clearly identified as the priority by practitioners. There is universal agreement that despite this fact, there are very few supporting guidelines for hospitality SMEs and that existing implementation was lacking tactical and intentional background. The impact of social media on the website implementation factors is described as evident in several areas, such as changing patterns of website discovery, newly emerging content streams from user-generated material and new opportunities for paid advertisement. While the impact of mobile marketing is equally undeniable, particularly in the website design area, there are also concerns that investments in mobile need to be clearly aligned with business objectives, as in many cases, the traditional website remains the main driver of revenue.

In terms of recommendations in the context of the road towards 2020, there is a common theme among all participants. The government has a vested interest in the success of hospitality SMEs, as evident by the existing government bodies in place. At the same time, these SMEs are receptive to guidance and willing to educate themselves in order to better participate in the digital market. However, there is a lack of comprehensive and up-to-date resources and little encouragement from the governing bodies, showing a clear opportunity in two areas. First, academia and policymakers need to collaborate and establish comprehensive guides and materials around digital marketing for SMEs, which can be accompanied by seminars, conferences and workshops. Establishments such as the Department of Tourism and Commerce Marketing and local universities can be potential drivers for these initiatives. Second, incentives should be created around rewarding SMEs that embrace the guidelines and advance their knowledge by attending such sessions. This could entail financial benefit but also consultancy-type assistance or market exposure, leveraging the resources of government organizations.

Summarizing the executives' comments, the ultimate outcome will be for SMEs to move from the prevalent *ad hoc* and "me-too" approach to a more strategic and comprehensive methodology when implementing a digital strategy. A risk that was identified is that during this process, hospitality SMEs must not lose their ability to differentiate themselves by building on their own unique characteristics – one size does not fit all.

Gaps and limitations
There are several limitations and gaps that emerged as described directly in the literature and inferentially in this article. From a methodological perspective, there is a need to complement qualitative research on web design with empirical testing (Küster and Vila, 2011, p. 149). Limited sample size played a role in several quantitative and qualitative studies (Brown and Kaewkitipong, 2009; Hamilton and Asundi, 2008; Lee

and Cranage, 2010). Heterogeneity among sampled businesses and the need to take it into consideration was identified by several studies, which complicated generalization and theory building (Murphy and Kielgast, 2008). In particular, the suitability of certain recommendations across all business types is brought up (Moriarty *et al.*, 2008). Brown and Kaewkitipong (2009) mention the lack of ability to generalize in the context of geographic characteristics and sectors. The need to synthesize the concepts together is discussed in a proposal by Rocha and Victor (2010) dealing with the development of a comprehensive assessment method of hotel websites.

To overcome the problems with generalized findings, authors propose similar studies with extended geographical and demographic scope as well as increased sample size (Law and Bai, 2008, p. 398; Namkung *et al.*, 2007, p. 94). However, Brown and Kaewkitipong (2009, p. 228) call for more focused research that takes specific characteristics and environmental factors sensitive to individual sectors or businesses into account. This indicates a twofold issue resulting in potential dilemmas for researchers. First, there clearly is a need for defined and universally applicable guidelines to help SMEs establish their online presence. Second, the authors recognized the requirement to acknowledge the complexity and disparity of the SME hospitality industry, thus calling for exploration that is sensitive to the individual factors influencing those businesses.

In the context of the digital roadmap, little research has been conducted in the topics around SOLOMO. While there are industry sources, the academic field has gaps, particularly when narrowing the focus on hospitality SMEs. Some argue that it is difficult for academics to keep up with the rapid changes in the digital field (Barnes *et al.*, 2012, p. 706). A closer collaboration between digital marketing experts, academia and SME practitioners will help to minimize this issue. Additionally, drawing from experiences and research conducted across other verticals should prove effective in aiding academia to overcome these issues.

Conclusion and outlook
SMEs are urged to assess their knowledge gaps in website implementation and investigate the appropriate areas. By taking action and identifying weaknesses, they can use these elements for feedback and quality improvements. Subsequently, current trends as outlined above can be assessed for suitability in the context of the SME's specific business objectives. SME executives also need to understand the impact that on-going changes in the environment have.

These findings aid the removal of barriers caused by lack of understanding of the factors related to website implementation in the broader SME hospitality community. This subsequently fosters adoption of the next phase – once businesses are confident to move beyond the website (Lwin and Phau, 2013). In the post modern marketing angle taken by Dekel *et al.* (2007), which focuses on customized, individualized processes tailored to each person and the Internet as facilitator to achieve this proposition for marketers, it appears inevitable that SMEs need to find an effective way to transfer this into action across a multitude of channels.

Based on the current state of affairs, it is clear that the SME website implementation landscape is in a state of flux. Concepts such as social media, mobile technologies and search engine optimization have gained traction in terms of web-related activities and they are all jockeying for position in terms of resources. To remain relevant, one must

actively monitor this space, continue to keep abreast of developments as they unfold and innovate, as competitive threats are cited as the primary concern for SMEs in the context of Dubai (Dubai SME, 2013).

Luckily, there is promising assessment towards the propensity for small businesses in the city to innovate and iterate on their business practices, thus setting a positive foundation for the local SME community to adopt the emerging digital roadmap (Al-Ansari *et al.*, 2013). Initiatives by local government bodies and academia as suggested by executives interviewed for this review should thus prove very effective. Further steps will involve monitoring the progress of practitioner understanding and academic advancements in overcoming limitations and gaps via regular reviews. The roadmap for adoption of the SOLOMO and Big Data strategies will need to be expanded as new trends emerge in the run-up to 2020 and collaboration between consumers, industry, academia and policymakers will be the only way to keep track of the adoption of the elements within this roadmap.

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