

FACING NEW CHALLENGES IN RURAL TOURISM: SIGNALING QUALITY VIA WEBSITE

ABSTRACT

Conscious of the importance of the tourist sector in Spain and the appeal of rural tourism in Andalusia, this paper aimed to analyse the quality indicators that rural Andalusian hotels show on their official websites (quality certifications, logos of excellence and online reviews), as well as the possible variables that may influence the sort of indicators published.

The results reflected that only 38% of the analysed hotels presented some sort of quality indicator. In this regard, 23.68% of the establishments provided information related to their online reputation, 20.3 % displayed some form of logos of excellence and only 7.5% chose to indicate that they had quality certifications. The hypothesis test indicated a significant correlation between the exhibition of logos of excellence and the high star hotels.

Enhancing rural hotels' websites, as a sales platform, could be the alternative to reduce the commissions of online travel agencies and could foster direct sales and subsequently improve business performance.

KEY WORDS: rural tourism; quality certifications; online reputation; TripAdvisor.

1 Introduction

The changes in the planning process of tourism consumption influence the competitive environment of the accommodation establishments, making their adaptation to the internet era and online resources essential. According to the 2016 edition of the TripBarometer, of the 36,444 travellers surveyed in 33 markets worldwide, 73% used online resources to decide on their destination and 86% to decide on their accommodation (TripAdvisor, 2016).

Considering, also, that the quality of the accommodation cannot be judged before the consumption of its services (Casaló, Fuentes, & Esteban, 2015; Litvin, Goldsmith, & Pan, 2008), many consumers rely on some form of online quality indicator in order to make a decision. In this sense, 86% of travelers surveyed in the 2017/18 edition of the TripBarometer would not book accommodation without reading reviews first (TripAdvisor, 2018).

In this context, the ease of searching via the internet has caused proliferation of the Online Travel Agencies (OTAs). Although initially they lowered the barriers to entry for the online bookings of small hotels, which have limited resources to manage a booking engine or a secure payment gateway (Gössling & Lane, 2015), it may bring high costs due to commissions. In the presence of this new form of competition in commercialisation, hotels have suffered a reduction in direct bookings via their official websites and have had to make an additional effort in order to not lose any more market share, and even, to recover some. In this respect, the use of hotels' official websites as a marketing strategy has been studied in some countries, analysing what information they offered and concluding that they were not using it in an effective manner (Gössling & Lane, 2015; Li, Wang, & Yu, 2015; Pelsmacker, Tilburg, & Holthof, 2018). However, when hotels own websites are used correctly, not only can they improve the relationship with the clients but also their booking intentions. Also, according to Aluri, Slevitch, & Larzelere (2016), the inclusion of social media on a hotel's website improves how information is perceived, social interaction, satisfaction and, indirectly, purchase intent. Furthermore, online reputation shown in a clear way on a hotel's official website can lead to more beneficial attitudes towards the hotel establishment (Casaló et al., 2015). More specifically, integrating third-party online reviews on the hotel website may have an impact on the number and

rating of reviews, which can generate an improvement in occupancy, as well as in profit (Pelsmacker et al, 2018). As well as including social interaction tools or reviews, the websites can provide information regarding quality certifications, which could be considered as indicators of a higher level of service and could even improve online reputation and occupancy (Peiró-Signes, Segarra-Oña, Verma, Mondéjar-Jiménez, & Vargas-Vargas, 2014; Tarí, Claver-Cortés, Pereira-Moliner, & Molina-Azorín, 2009). To the above we should add the extending use of logos of excellence on the websites of hotel establishments, which has not been studied in depth. So, for example, TripAdvisor has been analysed as an indicator of online reputation (Gössling et al., 2018; Melián-González, Bulchand-Gidumal, & González, 2013), but the usefulness of the different logos that this brand can offer has barely been studied. In this regard, there have been no studies into the extent to which these strategies are being incorporated in hotel establishments, which are the quality indicators that they are opting for on their websites and which variables may come into play during their selection.

This competitive environment is especially important in Spain, the country that was positioned as the second biggest tourist destination in the world, both for arrivals of international tourists and revenue (UNWTO, 2018). For example, in 2018, 82.7 million foreign tourists visited the country, of whom 54.1 million stayed in hotels. More specifically, 8.9 million foreign tourists and 9.8 million domestic tourists stayed in one of the 1,699 hotels in Andalusia. This region, situated in the south of Spain, came in second position in the ranking of the Spanish regions with a total of 18.7 million tourists that stayed in hotels (INE, 2019). If we single out rural tourism, this region offered, in 2017, capacity for approximately: (a) 68,000 beds in houses and rural apartments distributed across 8,600 establishments; (b) 14,600 beds in 54 camp sites; (c) and 26,200 beds in 591 rural hotel establishments (Andalusian Regional Department of Tourism and Sports, 2017).

Aware of the importance of the tourist sector in Spain and the appeal of rural tourism in Andalusia, this paper aimed to analyse the quality indicators that the Andalusian rural hotels shown on their official websites, as well as the possible variables that may influence the type of indicator they published. We focussed on three types of signs that may help to reduce the information asymmetry during the selection of tourist accommodation: (1) the quality certifications; (2) the logos of excellence; and (3) the online reputation.

2 Theoretical framework and hypotheses

Tourism is one of the main economic forces in developed countries. Developing rural tourism has been one of the strategies followed by Spain in order to improve its position as an international tourist destination and potentiate domestic tourism. It has been encouraged by: (1) the reduction of rural activities, due mainly to the changes in agriculture, depopulation and the ageing of the rural areas; (2) and the need to diversify the beach tourism that characterised Spain (Barke, 2004). In this way, rural tourism is promoted as an effective strategy for developing and revitalising rural areas (Briedenhan & Wickens, 2004; Lane et al., 2013), creating new opportunities of employment, preventing emigration to urban areas (Anand, Chandan, & Singh, 2012; Lane et al., 2013) and potentiating the sustainable development of protected areas (Ferrari, Mondéjar-Jiménez, & Vargas-Vargas, 2010; Lane et al., 2013; Vargas-Vargas & Mondéjar-Jiménez, 2010). However, the transformation of a rural area to rural tourism is far from simple, a process of adaptation is necessary for the residents of the rural areas which entails a long learning curve (Xue & Kerstetter, 2018).

Although Spanish rural tourism was developed very quickly in response to a growing demand (Yagüe, 2002), in recent years investigators have observed that the growth of this demand has slowed and that the average stay and the hotel occupancy rate have declined, meaning that it is necessary to improve competitiveness (Campón-Cerro, Hernández-Mogollón, & Alves, 2017; Polo, Frías, Rodríguez, & Rey, 2016). In the bid for quality, as a differentiation strategy, the classification of the hotel establishments is no longer enough. For example, the number of “stars” a hotel has, although it can be helpful when it comes to making a decision, (Abrate, Capriello, & Fraquelli, 2011; Fang, Ye, Kucukusta, & Law, 2016; Nicolau & Sellers, 2010; Ogüt & Tas, 2012), their usefulness has been questioned, due to, among other reasons, the heterogeneity of the criteria between countries as well as the different regions within countries (Núñez-Serrano, Turrión, & Velázquez, 2014; Torres, Adler, & Behnke, 2014).

One way to confront this situation and OTA’s competence is to increase the effectiveness of the websites, since the possibility that the rural establishments may directly interact with the clients facilitates the sales of their products and services, as well as improving their relations (Martin, 2004;

Gössling & Lane, 2015). In this respect, according to the study conducted by Herrero & San Martin (2012) regarding the websites of the rural establishments, the usefulness and user-friendliness of aforementioned websites may have an influence on the user's intention to make a direct booking. Furthermore, the management of client relationships via the website is presented as a very useful competitive strategy for hotel establishments that are small and independent. In relation to the information shown on their websites and in addition to the information related to the characteristics and rates of the establishments, it is necessary to add other quality indicators that make it possible to reduce the intangibility of the service.

Among the signals or indications that may improve a hotel establishment's differentiation, we might find, in addition to the official certifications of quality, the logos of excellence and the online reputation.

2.1 Quality Certifications

The implementation of quality assurance management systems and their certifications are part of a classic strategy to confront the competition in the tourist sector (Casadesus, Marimon & Alonso, 2010; Nield & Kozak, 1999). Among the most well-known quality certifications we find the quality assurance standard ISO 9001. Its levels of application and the motives behind its adoption have been studied in the Spanish hotel sector, arriving at the conclusion that this market of certifications has reached a level of maturity (Alonso-Almeida, Marimon & Bernardo, 2013; Djofack & Robledo, 2017). Accordingly, the organisations are cutting costs and are not renewing their certificates since it is not worth the effort and the implementation cost with respect to the added value which they would generate. Other studies defend the positive effect the implementation of the ISO 9001 has on the competitiveness of the hotel sector in Spain (Tari et al., 2009) and the little importance that it has to the online reputation (Heras-Saizarbitoria, Arana, & Boiral, 2015).

Focussing on the quality certifications for the Spanish accommodation sector we should add the Q Mark for Spanish Tourism Quality, based on the Spanish standard UNE 182001:2008 for hotels and tourist apartments". This certification, granted by the Spanish government through the Institute for Spanish Tourism Quality (ICTE) [its acronym in Spanish], is compatible with and similar to the ISO

9001 standard, but with specifications for the tourist sector. These standards include requirements for: (1) the establishments; (2) customer service; (3) organisational processes; and (4) the functions and management tools for client satisfaction (Casadeus et al., 2010, Alonso-Almeida et al., 2013).

Its application and possible effects on hotel performance have been analysed individually (Pereira-Moliner, Tarí, Molina-Azorín & López-Gamero, 2016; Álvarez-García, del Río-Rama & Biagio, 2017) or by comparing it with the ISO 9001 standard (Tarí et al., 2009; Álvarez, Viles, & Colomer, 2012; Alonso-Almeida et al., 2013; Sánchez-Ollero, García-Pozo & Marchante-Mera, 2014). In this regard, in Spain the Q Mark for Spanish Tourism Quality excels over the ISO 9001 since: (1) from the point of view of the clients, they consider that the Q Mark for Spanish Tourism Quality certification is closer to the expected service requirements (Tarí- Guilló & Pereira-Moliner, 2012); (2) it has a higher growth trend, due to the predominance of the Spanish tourism business managed by Spanish people and their tendency to favour the Spanish standards (Alonso-Almeida et al. 2013); (3) the increase in productivity reached by the establishments that implement the Q Mark for Spanish Tourism Quality is higher than the level obtained with the ISO 9001 (Sánchez-Ollero et al., 2014).

Finally, the importance of the environment for rural tourism (Ferrari et al., 2010; Vargas-Vargas y Modéjar-Jiménez, 2010; Villanueva-Álvaro, Mondéjar-Jiménez & Sáez-Martínez, 2017) lead us to include the environmental management certifications in our study, since they can also have an impact on customer-perceived service quality and satisfaction. Specifically, one of the most well-known environmental certifications is the ISO 14001 standard, managed by the ISO. According to Peiró-Signes et al. (2014), this certification helps to create value due to the significant improvement that it may give to online reputation. Particularly, in 4 star hotels, the ISO 14001 is a differentiating factor which has a positive impact on online reputation, since it allows them to compete with establishments of a higher category (Peiró-Signes, 2014). However, the hotels with more stars tend to have the ISO 9001 certification instead of the ISO 14001 (Heras-Saizarbitoria et al., 2015), although this is irrelevant to its online rating (Fuentes, Hernández, & Morini, 2016). This is not the case for the 3 and 4 star establishments, in which the certification allows them to achieve a better reputation.

Among the variables that may have an influence over the quality certification we can find the size of the establishment or the affiliation to a hotel chain, with a higher tendency to have certifications in the

bigger hotels and those which are affiliated to a hotel chain (Tari et al., 2009; Heras-Saizarbitoria et al., 2015). This is due to the fact that the larger establishments tend to have a more established and professional structure, for this reason they are able to dedicate more resources to the implementation of management systems (Peiró-Signes et al., 2014; Djofack & Robledo, 2017), promoting therefore, quality certifications adoption, as well as the environmental management certifications.

Under these considerations the following hypotheses are proposed regarding the websites of rural hotels in Andalusia:

H1: Hotel stars rating will have a positive influence on the displaying of quality certifications on website.

H2: Hotel size will have a positive influence on the displaying of quality certifications on website.

H3: Affiliation to a hotel chain will have a positive influence on the displaying of quality certifications on website.

2.2 Logos of excellence

In combination with quality certifications, we also find logos of excellence, that show us distinctions and awards obtained by the establishment, such as TripAdvisor logos (Bravo, Excellence, GreenLeader, etc.), travel guides recommendations or the prizes awarded by travel magazines. In contrast to the studies into quality certifications granted by public bodies, logos of excellence in the accommodation sector have been studied to a lesser extent.

Among the papers published we can find the study carried out by Nicolau and Seller (2010), where it is pointed out that the hotel establishments, attempt to obtain and show as many of them as possible in order to increase the certification and quality awards potential. Although the relation between logos of excellence and quality certifications with the market quote of the hotel chain was proved, the individual analysis didn't show that the logos of excellence had any clear effect.

Other logos that appear on hotels websites which have been studied are the environmental awards and labels, whose presence seem to have an influence over the perceived quality and selection of an establishment (Sparks, Perkins, & Buckley, 2013; Park & Millar, 2016).

However, no studies have been found that analyse logos level of acceptance by hotels, and what characteristics the establishments that use them have. With all of this in mind, we set the following hypotheses regarding the logos of excellence displayed on the websites of rural hotels in Andalusia:

H4: Hotel stars rating will have a positive influence on the displaying of logos of excellence on website.

H5: Hotel size will have a positive influence on the displaying of logos of excellence on website.

H6: Affiliation to a hotel chain will have a positive influence on the displaying of logos of excellence on website.

2.3 Online reputation

Many consumers depend on third-party review to get valuable insights and inferences from goods and services quality (Wirtz & Chew, 2002; Book, Tanford, Montgomery & Love, 2018). Therefore, online reviews or electronic word of mouth (eWOM) may have an important influence on the customer's booking intentions. In tourism and accommodation sector, this information is perceived as more independent and reliable than the information provided by the establishment (Ye, Law, Gu, & Chen, 2011; Zhao, Wang, Guo & Law, 2015). Moreover, the reviews credibility are dependent on trustworthiness and expertise, so since two good friends are likely to share common interests and think alike, good friend's opinion outweigh the online majority (Gellerstedt & Arvemo, 2019).

With regard to the investigation in the hotel sector, the studies have been focussed on analysing the role of online reviews in the decision making process and the estimation of the market shares or booking intentions (Sparks & Browning, 2011; Ogut y Tas, 2012; Duverger, 2013; Zhao et al., 2015; Gellerstedt & Arvemo, 2019), the factors that make these reviews useful (Liu & Park, 2015; Fang et al., 2016), or the effects of different rating systems (Casaló et al., 2015; Mellinas, Martínez, & Bernal, 2016; Mariani & Borghi, 2018).

With reference to the variables that may have an effect on online reputation, hotel establishments with more stars present better reputation ratings, verifying this system of classification (Martín-Fuentes, 2016). Another variable that may have an impact on online reputation could be the hotel size.

However, although hotels with more rooms usually have a higher number of reviews, the achieved rating does not seem to be related to the size of the establishment (Martín-Fuentes, 2016). However, if reviews per room (which is obtained by dividing the number of reviews for a given hotel by its number of rooms) are analysed, Mellinas, & Martín-Fuentes (2019) claim that small hotels have a far higher mean reviews per room than medium or large hotels. Furthermore, one-stars hotels had a higher level of reviews per room than other categories and there was a significant effect mean reviews per room on TripAdvisor for independent hotels compared with chain hotels. Given that TripAdvisor enhanced its online reputation index algorithm focusing on the quantity and consistency of reviews, review volume is now even more important for rankings (TripAdvisor, 2018).

Regarding the inclusion of online reputation on hotel website, in accordance with Pelsmacker et al. (2018), the ratings shown on the website have: (1) a negative indirect effect for lower stars hotels and no significant for higher ones; (2) a direct effect on room occupancy and a positive effect on productivity; (3) a moderate effect on both the hotel chains and independent hotels. On the other hand, Cascales, Fuentes, & Esteban (2017) show that the hotels affiliation to a hotel chain give more importance to online reputation, via review sites and official websites.

Therefore, the posed hypotheses were as follows:

H7: Hotel stars rating will have a positive influence on the displaying of online reputation on website.

H8: Hotel size will have a positive influence on the displaying of online reputation on website.

H9: Affiliation to a hotel chain will have a positive influence on the displaying of online reputation on website.

3 Methodology

According to the Tourism Register for Andalusia (Andalusian Regional Department of Tourism and Sports, 2017), at the beginning of 2018, 591 hotel establishments were registered as rural hotel establishments, including hotels, hostels, apartment-hotels and bed and breakfasts. Among rural

lodging establishment we focused our study in the 313 open rural hotels located in Andalusia in 2018. After examining which hotels had an official website, only 266 provided analysable data.

For each of these establishments we analysed 8 variables that could be separated into three groups:

(1) those which determine the general profile of the establishment (number of stars, age, size and the affiliation to a hotel chain); (2) those which are related to online quality indicators (quality certifications, logos of excellence and online reviews), shown on Hotel official website; (3) that which determines the management of its online reputation (internal management, external management or both).

All the variables related to establishment profile, with the exception of the affiliation to a hotel chain, were taken from the Tourism Register for Andalusia (Andalusian Regional Department of Tourism and Sports, 2017) and the rest of the variables were obtained by analysing hotels website (see “Appendix” for a typical hotel main page).

The establishments were grouped, according to the number of stars, in lower category (1 and 2 stars), medium category (3 stars) and superior category (4 and 5 stars). The variable related to the size of the hotel was divided, according to the number of rooms, into three categories (small, medium and large). In this regard, hotels which had less than 50 rooms were considered as small hotels, those which had between 50 and 300 rooms as medium sized hotels, and finally, large hotels whether they had more than 300 rooms.

For the analysis of the quality certifications shown on the websites, both the certifications related to quality management and as well as those related to environmental management were included.

Specifically, we analysed the presence of certifications ISO 9001, ISO 14001, Q Mark for Spanish Tourism Quality and Commitment to Tourism Quality from the Integral System for Quality in Tourism in Spain as a Destination (SICTED in Spanish). The last one is a voluntary quality system granted by the Spanish government. It aims to assure the internal management of tourism enterprises, establishing controls in the processes which ensure the satisfaction of the clients and guaranteeing the security and comfort of the installations.

In this regard, the analysis of the “Directory of certified establishments and areas in Andalusia” (Andalusian Regional Department of Tourism and Sports, 2018) showed that only 0.96% of rural

hotels had ISO 9001, 1.28% had ISO 14001, 1.28% had Q Mark for Spanish Tourism Quality and 6.71% had SICTED.

On the other hand, with regard to logos of excellence we included other symbols which aims to improve customer quality perception. Such as non-governmental certifications, awards, recommendations or specialised websites collaborations.

In this variable were included TripAdvisor awards and recognitions (Bravo, Excellence, Eco, Travel Choice, Hall or Green Leader), recommendations of prestigious magazines and travel guides (Condé Nast Johansens, Michelin Guide, Rick Steves or Routard, for example), awards (such as Boutique Hotel Awards, Seven Star Global luxury awards, World SPA awards, etc.), OTA's recognitions of excellence (Booking Guest, Trivago Top Hotel, Excellent by Hotels Combined, for example) or recommendations of specialised websites (Ruralka, Dommus Selecta, Bikefriendly, etc.).

Finally, the hotel's official website display of online reputation was analysed. It took in consideration any numeric or symbolic online rating, or guest reviews that allow to inference the establishment quality. Specifically, we analysed whether the hotel managed ratings and reviews internally or if they opted to show information processed by a third-party agent (OTAs, accommodation comparison sites, social networks or a review aggregator, such as ReviewPro, Customer Alliance or TrustYou).

We also analysed the accessibility of the information, differentiating whether it was shown on the website's homepage or through a link for opinions, specifying, whether an average score or only a list of the opinions was shown.

After a descriptive analysis based on the frequencies of the variables, Possible dependencies between variables were studied through hypothesis test with the chi-square statistic, using SPSS version 20 (IBM Corp., Armonk, N.Y., USA).

4 Results

4.1 Profile of the hotel establishments

The results obtained from the analysis of the variables are represented in Table 1. According to these results, in Andalusia the rural hotels are characterised by being small and independent, having less than 4 stars and by having begun operating in the year 2000 or later.

Table 1 – Results of the descriptive analysis

Variable	Category	No.	%
1. Number of stars	· Low category (1 and 2 stars)	128	48.12%
	· Medium category (3 stars)	87	32.71%
	· Superior category (4 and 5 stars)	51	19.17%
2. Age	· Established prior to 1980	16	6.0%
	· Established between 1980 and 1989	16	6.0%
	· Established between 1990 and 1999	66	24.8%
	· Established between 2000 and 2009	132	49.6%
	· Established in or subsequent to 2010	36	13.5%
3. Size	· Small (< 50 rooms)	188	70.68%
	· Medium (50 -300 rooms)	61	22.93%
	· Large (> 300 rooms)	17	6.39%
4. Affiliation to a hotel chain	· Independent	221	83.08%
	· Associated	45	16.92%
5. Quality certifications	· ISO 9001	3	1.13%
	· Q Mark for Spanish Tourism Quality	4	1.50%
	· ISO 14001	3	1.13%
	· SICTED	10	3.76%
6. Logos of excellence	· Yes	54	20.30%
	· No	212	79.70%
7. Online reputation shown	· Yes	63	23.68%
	· No	203	76.32%
8. Type of online reputation management	· Internal	30	47.62%
	· Third-party	31	49.21%
	· Both	2	3.17%

Regarding the quality indicators on the official websites, the study showed that only 103 of the 266 rural hotels which were analysed presented some sort of quality indicator, whether it was a certificate, a logo of excellence or a rating from online reviews.

4.2 Quality certifications

Regarding the certifications (Table 1), only 7.52% of the establishments show that they have some form of quality certification, and most of them used the SICTED certification.

Collating these results with the information published by the Andalusian government (Andalusian Regional Department of Tourism and Sports, 2018) it was observed that, with only one exception, all the rural hotels with the following certifications: ISO 9001, ISO 14001, and Q Mark for Spanish Tourism Quality, shown aforementioned certifications on their website. However, half of the establishments with the SICTED certification didn't display it on their official website. Considering

that showing a commitment to tourism quality and being part of the geographical regions that provide it are enough to obtain this certification, the low levels of online dissemination may indicate that rural hotels don't appreciate it as a marketing tool.

Due to the low number of hotels that actually display this certification, a complete hypothesis test was not able to carry out (Table 2). Specifically, only the relation between the presence of quality certifications and the number of stars could be analysed, making it impossible to reject H_{10} , since no statistically significant connection was observed ($p = 0.207$).

Table 2 – Results of the hypothesis test

	Hypothesis 1		Hypothesis 2		Hypothesis 3	
	Stars		Size		Affiliation to a hotel chain	
	Value	Sig.	Value	Sig.	Value	Sig.
Has quality certifications	3.15	0.207	- (a)	- (a)	- (a)	- (a)
Has logos of excellence	13.96	0.001	4.498	0.106	1.357	0.244
Offers online reputation	1.854	0.396	0.713	0.700	2.790	0.095

^(a) Percent of frequency expected lower superior to 20%

4.3 Logos of excellence

The analysis of rural hotels official websites indicated that logos of excellence have a very low usage rate (Table 1), since only 20.3% of the establishments shown an icon of this kind on the home page of their website. However, it is worth mentioning that of the 54 establishments that did include them on their website, 72.2% of them used the image of TripAdvisor, in its various brands, alone or together with other logos (Table 3). In particular, the most commonly used icon was “Trip Excellence”, shown by 29 hotels, including, in some cases, certifications from different years.

The hypothesis test (Table 2) allowed us to reject H_{40} and accept H_{4a} , since a significant relation was observed between the stars of a hotel and the number of logos of excellence shown on the website ($p = 0.001$). The higher category hotels shown those logos to a larger extent (40% of the establishments of this category included logos of excellence, in comparison with 18.5% of the establishments of a lower category).

Table 3. Disaggregation of the information regarding logos of excellence

	No. of hotels	% s/ hotels with website ^a	% s/ hotels with logos of excellence ^b
TripAdvisor	39	14.7%	72.2%
Recommendations from specialised websites	19	7.1%	35.2%
Awards	14	5.3%	25.9%
Booking websites recognition	13	4.9%	24.1%
Recommendations from travel guides and magazines	9	3.4%	16.7%
^a 266 hotels had a website; ^b 54 hotels had logos of excellence			

The hypotheses that associate the size of a hotel (H5_a) and the affiliation of aforementioned hotel to a hotel chain (H6_a) could not be accepted, seeing as it was not possible to associate the number of rooms and the independence of the hotel with the publishing of logos of excellence.

4.4 Online reputation

According to the results of Table 1, online reputation was the most common quality indicator found during the study (23.68% of the establishments had some form of these indicators).

The majority of them opted to display ratings from third-party online reviews (52.38% of the hotels with online review management), highlighting the usage of ratings or reviews posted by customers on TripAdvisor (Table 4). Accordingly, 46.3% of the rural hotels in Andalusia that shown some form of online reputation indicator on their website used, either alone or in a complementary manner, the TripAdvisor indicator.

On the other hand, when the establishments decided to display information related to customers' reviews, they mainly opted to make this information easily accessible, displaying their obtained global rating on the home page of their website.

The result of the hypothesis test (Table 2) did not allow us to reject the null hypotheses (H7₀, H8₀ and H9₀), consequently it was impossible to demonstrate significant relation between the presence of online reputation and the number of stars, the size or the affiliation to a hotel chain ($p = 0.396$, $p = 0.700$ and $p = 0.095$).

Table 4. Disaggregation of the information regarding online reputation

	No. of hoteles	% of all hotels with website ^a	% of all hotels with reviews	% of hotels with third-party online reviews ^c
THIRD-PARTY ONLINE REVIEWS				
TripAdvisor	25	9.4%	39.7%	76%
Booking	9	3.4%	14.3%	27%
Facebook	1	0.4%	1.6%	3%
Customer Alliance	1	0.4%	1.6%	3%
ACCESSIBILITY				
High	50	18.8%	79.4%	-
Low	13	4.9%	20.6%	-
TYPE OF REVIEW				
With rating	41	15.4%	65.1%	-
Without rating	22	8.3%	34.9%	-
^a 266 hotels with website; ^b 63 hotels with reviews; ^c 33 hotels had third-party online reviews				

5 Discussion and conclusions

The use of global Internet-based reservation systems for accommodation has grown massively. This development appears particularly relevant for rural tourism, characterised by the presence of small establishments, empowering to reach a large global customers and to manage their hotels in a more professional manner. In this regard, there is a lack of studies which analyse the quality indicators on the official websites of hotels. These indicators may promote more favourable attitudes towards the establishment. This paper reviewed the publication of quality certifications, logos of excellence and online reputation on Andalusia rural hotels web page, characterised for being independent from hotel chains, small size and low stars. The main results show scarce publication of quality indicators on the websites of hotels, where online reviews were most commonly found.

We can also see that logos of excellence are gaining more importance than quality certifications, as a differentiating element, proving that hotels with a higher category are more tend to show logos of excellence, mainly TripAdvisor brand logos.

This trend has not been studied deeply, even though many papers that analyse the role that quality certifications in the hotel sector have been published, particularly in Spain (Pereira-Moliner et al., 2016; Álvarez-García et al., 2017; Djofack et al., 2017). Furthermore, the literature on online

reputation ratings (Martin-Fuentes, 2016; Mellinas et al., 2016) are sparse in how hotels are incorporated these ratings in their business management.

More specifically, if we focus on rural tourism, no studies have been found that evaluate its level of acceptance, for this reason we addressed this sector.

An in-depth analysis of the results proves three important aspects. First of all, coinciding with other studies of the official websites of hotels (Gössling & Lane, 2015; Li et al., 2015; Pelsmacker et al, 2018), the study we carried out shows that Andalusian rural hotels do not use their websites in an effective manner, demonstrated by the low usage rate of quality indicators (only 38.72% of the establishments show some form of certification, logo or online reputation). Secondly, was noticed a scarce number of quality certifications in comparison with logos of excellence, such as those from TripAdvisor, which are more well-known by clients (Nicollau & Sellar, 2009; Park & Millar, 2015) and cost less than starting a certification process. Thirdly, the predominance of third-party online reviews as an online reputation indicator in rural hotels stands out, mainly TripAdvisor. In this regard, the extension of TripAdvisor is more pronounced in rural hotels than it is on the whole for all hotel types (urban hotels, beach hotels, roadside hotels and rural hotels), according to the paper of Pelsmacker et al (2018), focussed on 3, 4 and 5 star hotels, without distinguishing between the different types of hotel.

In reference to the posed hypotheses, in the rural hotels in Andalusia the number of stars did not have an effect on the publication of quality certifications, which differ from the results of Heras-Saizarbitoria et al. (2015). However, a larger proportion of the establishments of superior category have a tendency to display logos of excellence. In the accommodation sector which was studied, the size of the hotel or the affiliation to a group was not related to the publication of logos or online reputation on the official website. These results do not coincide with those obtained by Casales et al. (2017), in 4 stars hotels of another region of Spain, where there were differences with the establishments affiliation to a hotel chain.

However, it must be considered that the study carried out by Heras-Saizarbitoria et al. (2015) and that carried out by Cascales et al. (2017) analysed the hotels by aggregating the data without differentiating between the types of hotel (urban hotel, a rural hotel, a beach hotel or a roadside hotel).

The wide acceptance of the TripAdvisor brand as a quality indicator, through its logos of excellence or online reputation, can be strengthened by the characteristics of the rural accommodation sector, with establishments that are small in size and have limited resources for the internal management of online reviews or for getting involved in a quality certification process. Even though the reliability and credibility of the reviews posted on TripAdvisor has been thoroughly analysed (Mayzlin & Chevalier, 2014; Schuckert, Liu, & Law, 2016; Gössling et al., 2018; Zhuang, Cui, & Peng, 2018), since this comparison site does not require confirmation that a client has stayed in the hotel to be able to leave a review, many hotels have preferred this source of online reputation rather than the one offered by Online Travel Agencies (OTAs), in their search to boost their direct sales.

However, since 2016 TripAdvisor is not only a comparison website for the hotel sector, seeing as it now also offers the possibility to book accommodation via its website, thus converting it into a competitor of booking directly through the hotel. This circumstance may change the privileged position of TripAdvisor, as it is also threatened by the growth of Google as a review platform (Google Review). For that matter, according the study of ReviewPro (2019) in 2018, 37% of the online reviews for 3, 4 and 5 star hotels worldwide were posted on Google, followed by Booking.com (31%), while 12% were uploaded to TripAdvisor. Notwithstanding, most of the reviews posted on Google tended to include only a rating, whereas on TripAdvisor comments were included and the destination was analysed in more depth.

In the current competitive context in which the market of online bookings is dominated by a few OTAs and yet 15% of the rural hotels in Andalusia still do not have their own website, the awareness of the importance and effective use of websites is essential to promote direct booking and to reduce commission costs.

We are aware that the conclusions of this paper cannot be generalised, due to the fact that the investigation was focussed on the rural hotels in Andalusia. For this reason, we will dedicate future investigations to widening the geographic scope and to the different types of rural accommodation in order to analyse possible parallelisms and to obtain more general conclusions.

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Appendix

The picture below illustrates an example of information shown on the official website of a hotel.

The image displays a screenshot of the Hotel Cortijo del Marqués website and a video player. The website header includes the hotel name and navigation tabs for ROOMS, HOTEL, RESTAURANT, ACTIVITIES, and BOOKING. Below the header are three main image sections: 'Discover Andalusia', 'Relax by the pool', and 'Get to know us'. To the right, there are sections for 'Get directions', 'Our ratings' (highlighted with a circle), and 'Booking.com Guest Review Awards 2018' (also highlighted with a circle). The ratings section shows a 9.6/10 score from 148 reviews on Booking.com and 280 reviews on TripAdvisor. Below the ratings is a '2018 CERTIFICATE of EXCELLENCE' from TripAdvisor, which is also highlighted with a circle. The video player shows a room with a desk, chairs, and a window, with the text 'HOTEL CORTIJO DEL MARQUÉS (Granada) - HOTELES CON ENCANTO' and 'Hotel Cortijo del Marqués (Granada)' overlaid.

Source: Hotel Cortijo del Marqués (<https://www.cortijodelmarques.com/>).