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ASSESSING QUALITY OF WEBSITES THROUGH OBSERVATION

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ABSTRACT

Website is an electronic brochure of an organization where the organization's product, information and services are displayed. Hence, in this Internet age, websites have become the identity of every organization. So, in order to acquire a decent competitive position, organizations need to improve the quality of their websites. This arouses the need to understand the attributes of quality, as perceived by the prospective viewers. This study is an attempt to evaluate the quality of websites by observing quality attributes on those websites. Five classes of websites are classified based on the product they offer. The sample comprised of a total of 30 websites, considering six websites (3 national and 3 international websites) from each of the five classes of websites. The presence of attributes of four website quality features viz. marketing, accessibility, information and presentations identified from literature are observed in the sample websites. The websites are also observed for special attributes, if any. Based on the observations, features of each class of website are assessed and a comparison among the website features of different classes of websites is done. The study also identifies the Special features of each website classification.

KEYWORDS

electronic brochure, websites.

INTRODUCTION

With the advent of Internet technology, every organization and individual felt the need for creating their space in the web. Website is an electronic medium through which an organization or an individual can capture attention. It acts as an interface through which the website owner communicates with its target users. A Website can also be defined as an electronic brochure of an organization. It is a place where organizations project their products and services for sale. Therefore, it is very important that a website must be informative, accessible and well presented. In this highly competitive world, where the website represents the organization's identity, a small negligence on the part of the organization might weaken the organization's competitive position. It is therefore important that an organization be able to make an assessment of the quality of their website as perceived by their users and in the context of the competition in their industry. In order to help the organizations in assessing their website quality, it is essential to identify the attributes of website that determine its quality.

OBJECTIVE

This study aims at comparing different classes of websites based on observed quality attributes identified from literature. The study also assesses the quality features and identifies the special features of each class of websites.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Previous studies have identified different attributes of Website that determine its quality.

Barnes and Vidgen (2000) assessed the quality of Internet Auction sites by observing the quality dimensions identified by WebQual 3.0, which they modified from WebQual 1.0 and WebQual 2.0. Web information quality, web interaction quality and site design quality are the quality dimensions in WebQual 3.0. Another study identified the design issues of university websites (Farkas, 1997). The design issues are (1) indicating the identity of individual units within the hierarchical structure of the institution; (2) maintaining visual consistency throughout the site and (3) harmonizing the messages conveyed by the university's homepage and the homepages of the university's colleges and departments. In yet another study, Udo and Marquis (2000) conducted a survey involving 117 e-commerce customers, which aimed at gathering opinions of commercial web users in order to determine the critical design features of an effective website. The features of good website quality used in the study are cohesion, navigation, interactivity, graphics and aesthetics; download time, advertisement, frames, use of color, use of language and basic website maintenance. Jenamani, et al. (2002) developed a design benchmark by studying the design features of 148 corporate websites. The features that were considered for studying the websites are Marketing, Accessibility, Presentation, Informative and Special features. Content quality, service quality and technical quality are considered as the dimensions of a framework for evaluating the global quality of websites by Rocha (2011).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study is based on observation of quality attributes in websites. Samples of 30 websites are observed for the study. These websites can be classified into five categories viz. web mail sites, e-shopping sites, online trading sites, IT company's sites and e-ticketing sites. From each class, six sites are observed, out of which three are national and three are international. Selection of websites is done to ensure a blend of communication and marketing. The websites observed for the study are listed in Table 1 of ANNEXURE. Website observations are made in the month of November, 2013.

The websites are observed for the presence of the following features identified by Jenamani, et al. (2002).

Marketing features, Accessibility Features, Presentation Features, Informative Features and Special Features of a website.

The attributes of each of the above features are as follows.

Attributes of Marketing Features

Product Page, Dealer Locator, Links to country sites, Price, Advertisement, Sales Promotion, Online Ordering, Customer Support and Marketing Research.

Attributes of Accessibility Features

Site Map, Site Search, External Links, Internal Links and Site evaluation offer.

Attributes of Presentation Features

Real Time Interactivity, Use of Audio, Use of Video, Use of Frames, Page Orientation, Graphics, Background color (Bgcolor) and Foreground color (Fgcolor).

Attributes of Informative Features

Profile, Career (Job Opportunities), News & Events, Legal Notices, Privacy statements, Investor Relations, FAQ's, Links to e-markets, Contact and Customer Feedback.

The details of the features are given in Table II of ANNEXURE.

Except for the page orientation, graphics, foreground color and background color attributes of presentation feature, the other attributes are measured in a Yes/No type binary scale to indicate the presence or absence of a feature. For Page orientation, 1 is considered for portrait orientation and 2 is considered for landscape orientation. Graphics is measured subjectively using 3-point scale. In this scale, 0 (zero) indicates no use of graphics, 1 is considered for moderate use of graphics and 2 indicates high use of graphics. Foreground colour and background colour are measured subjectively, using an 8-point scale. This scale is meant

to emphasize the presence of Red, Green or Blue (RGB) colour in the website. In this scale, 0 (zero) is assumed to be pure white, 7 to be pure black, 1 and 2 to be green shades, 3 and 4 to be blue shades, and 5 and 6 to be red shades.

RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

The results of the study are analyzed in three ways:

1. Feature wise comparison of different classes of websites,
2. Assessing the features observed on each class of website, and
3. Identifying special feature of each class of website (if any).

FEATURE WISE COMPARISON OF DIFFERENT CLASSES OF WEBSITES

The results of the observation of the website attributes measured in binary scale are presented in Table 3. From the observations, it is found that the marketing attribute product page, dealer locator and online ordering are observed in all classes of websites. On the other hand, marketing features price, advertisement, sales promotion and customer support are observed in all classes of websites, except for webmail websites. Presence of market research attribute is negligible (1%) in all classes of websites whereas links to country sites varies in different classes of websites.

Presence of accessibility attribute internal link is observed in all classes of websites whereas external link is not observed only in IT company sites. Site search is observed in majority of websites while only fifty percent of websites performs site evaluation and about fifty seven percent possess sitemap.

TABLE 3: RESULTS OF OBSERVATIONS OF WEBSITES

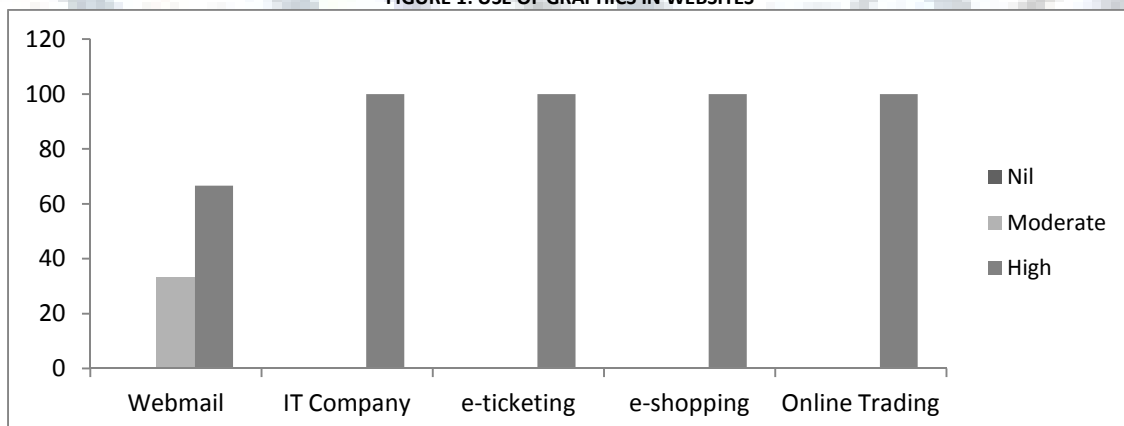
Features	Attributes	Percentage (%) Observed in Websites				
		Webmail	IT Company	e-ticketing	e-shopping	Online Trading
Marketing	Product Page	100	100	100	100	100
	Dealer Locator	100	100	100	100	100
	Links to country sites	33.33	100	100	50	16.67
	Price	0	100	100	100	100
	Advertisement	50	100	100	100	100
	Sales Promotion	50	100	100	100	100
	Online Ordering	100	100	100	100	100
	Customer Support	66.67	100	100	100	100
	Market Research	0	0	33.3	0	16.67
Accessibility	Sitemap	16.67	83.3	83.3	33.3	66.67
	Site Search	66.67	100	100	100	83.3
	External Links	83.3	100	100	100	100
	Internal Links	100	100	100	100	100
	Site Evaluation	33.3	66.67	33.3	66.67	50
Presentation	Real Time Interactivity	33.3	100	83.3	83.3	83.3
	Use of Audio	0	100	16.67	0	100
	Use of Video	0	100	16.67	0	100
	Use of Frames	0	0	0	0	0
	Virtual Community	50	100	83.3	33.3	50
Informative	Profile	16.67	100	100	100	100
	Career	0	100	100	83.3	66.67
	News & Events	66.67	100	100	66.67	66.67
	Legal Notice	83.3	100	100	100	66.67
	Privacy statements	66.67	100	100	100	100
	Investor Relations	0	83.3	100	33.3	33.3
	FAQ's	66.67	100	66.67	100	83.3
	Links to e-markets	66.67	0	100	100	100
	Contact	16.67	100	100	100	100
	Customer Feedback	100	83.3	100	83.3	66.67

Presentation attributes real time interactivity (76.7%) and virtual communities (73.3%) are observed in majority of the websites. Audio and video are mostly used in IT Company and Online Trading websites and few e-ticketing websites. Frames are not used in any of the sample websites.

Majority of the websites provides news and events (80%), legal notice (90%), privacy statements (93.3%), FAQs (83.3%) and customer feedback (86.7%). Except for webmail websites, informative attributes such as profile (100%), career (70%) and contact (100%) are observed in majority of the websites whereas investor relation attribute is observed in fifty percent of the websites. Links to e-market is not observed only in IT Company sites.

From the observations it is also found that the websites follow portrait page orientation. Figure 1 shows the usage of graphics in the sample websites. From the figure, it can be seen that except for few (33.3%) webmail websites, all websites displays high usage of graphics.

FIGURE 1: USE OF GRAPHICS IN WEBSITES



The patterns of foreground and background color of the websites which are measured in an 8 point-scale are shown in Figure 2 and Figure 3 respectively.

FIGURE 2: PATTERN OF BACKGROUND COLOUR USAGE

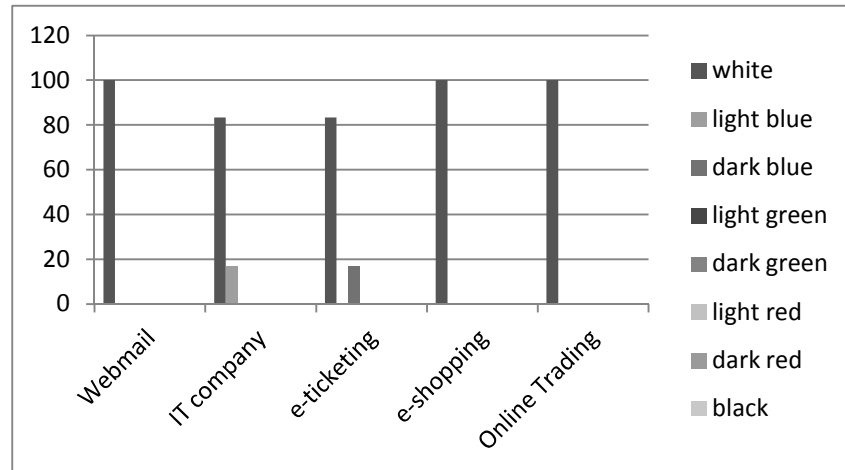
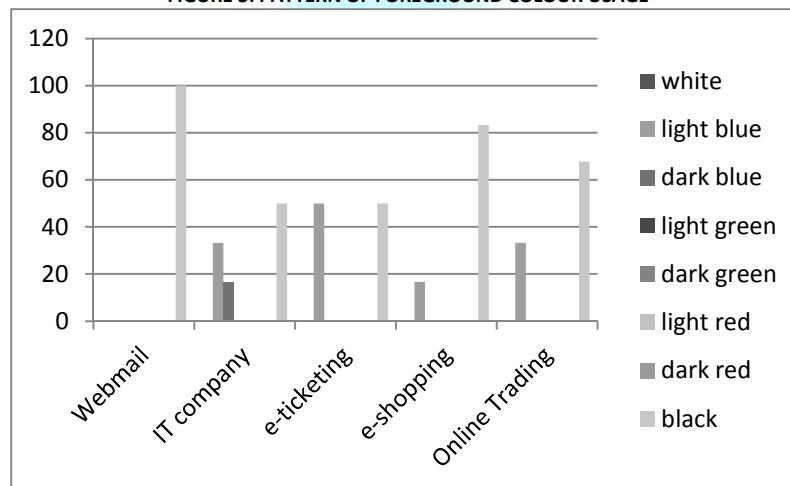


FIGURE 3: PATTERN OF FOREGROUND COLOUR USAGE



From Figure 2, it can be seen that the most preferred background colour of all classes of websites is pure white (93.3%). Blue shade websites background color is also observed in few IT Company (3.33%) and e-ticketing (3.33%) websites.

Black colour (70%) is found to be the most preferred foreground colour of all classes of websites, as illustrated in Figure 3. Moreover, except for webmail websites, blue shades (30%) are also used as foreground colour in other classes of websites.

ASSESSING THE FEATURES OBSERVED IN WEBSITES

An assessment of the features observed in each class of website is discussed next.

Assessment of features observed in web mail websites

In Web Mail website, marketing features like product page, dealer locator, advertisement, sales promotion, online order and customer support are observed whereas links to country sites, price and market research are not observed in most of the websites. Product page in this context refers to the list of facilities of web mail like inbox, write mails, address books, etc. and the details of these facilities are dealer locator. Web Mail incorporates both outside advertisement and also advertisement regarding the new facilities that they are including in their website. Sales promotion in web mails is done through advertisements and special offers. Online orders in these sites are the orders given by users to send their mails and attachments. Customer support is provided by web mails sites to help customers in dealing with problems encountered in using web mails. Web mails are only virtually available, as such another country site does not exist; therefore links to country sites is not important for these sites. Since, web mails are mostly free, price option is not observed in these sites. However, in some web mail sites, provisions for increasing the mailbox capacity by incurring some price exist. The popularity of a web mail can be estimated by the numbers of mail accounts created, therefore there is no requirement for an additional market research.

Presentation features like audio and video files and frames are not observed whereas real time interactivity and virtual community are observed in few Web Mail websites. Real time interactivity and virtual community are not much desired in these sites as people use these sites only for sending and reading mails. An audio and video file in websites makes them slow. Therefore, they are not promoted in web mail sites, as people select those web mails, which open fast.

Among the Accessibility features, site search, external links and internal links are observed in web mail sites whereas sitemap and site evaluation features are not observed in most of the websites. Sitemap shows the organization of the website, which is not so important for web mails. Site Evaluation feature of web mails sites would give the web users an idea of the best web mail site.

Informative features like profile, career, investor relation and contact are not much observed whereas news and events, legal notices, privacy statements, FAQ's, links to e-market and customer feedback features are observed in a web mail website. Profiles and contact address of web mails are not available as most of the web mails are products of other companies. Career option is redundant in web mail websites as it has limited openings that do not need advertisement. As webmail are mostly free, therefore displaying financial reports through investor relation link is redundant in these sites. News and events of outside world are only available in web mail sites. Web mails websites have links to e-markets sites like Job sites, Matrimony sites, and provides antivirus to scan attachments.

Assessment of features observed in IT Company websites

In IT Company websites marketing features like product page, dealer locator, links to country sites, price, advertisement, sales promotion, online order and customer support are observed whereas market research is not observed in most of the websites. Product page of IT company websites displays the list of the products (software and hardware) developed by the company along with details of the product (dealer locator) and its price. Advertisements of these products are also observed in their sites. Sales promotion of an IT Company website is done with the help of advertisements and discount offers. In their website,

provisions for online order of the products are also incorporated. Links to country site is the link to the websites of branches of the Company, located in other countries. As IT Companies are global in nature, presence of links to country sites is observed in majority of the websites.

Except for frames, all the other presentation features like real time interactivity, use of audio, use of video, and virtual community are observed in majority of the websites. Real time interactivity and virtual community is provided through social networking sites like Facebook, twitter, etc., which are linked with the IT Company websites. Audio and video files in these sites are mostly the demos of their software.

All the Accessibility features, Site Map, Site Search, External Links, Internal Links and Site Evaluation are observed in most of the IT Company websites. External Links from these sites are mainly to the social networking sites. Site Evaluation through feedback from users is given importance in order to make the website user friendly.

Informative features like profile, career, news and events, legal notices, privacy statements, investor relations, FAQ's and contact are observed whereas links to e-market feature is not seen in most of the IT Company websites. As IT Companies sale only the product produce by them so links to other company's e-market is not present. Information like upcoming meetings of investor, financial projections of the company, etc. are shown through the investor relation feature. This information is not only useful for investors of the company but also useful for prospective investors who want to invest in the company. FAQ's is an important feature mainly for these sites, because users of these sites may have many product related queries.

Assessment of features observed in e-ticketing websites

In e-ticketing websites, marketing features like product page, dealer locator, link to country sites, price, advertisement, sales promotion, online order and customer support are observed. In these sites, products are tickets for different services. Dealer locator shows the details of the tickets. Since e-ticketing websites are international sites, therefore through links to country site we can visit the sites of different countries of the same Travel Agent. Price is the price of the tickets. Advertisements are given for different offers and schemes offered by the Travel Agent. Sales promotion is done through these advertisements. Tickets can be purchased online from these sites by placing online order. Travel and ticket related queries are handled by the customer support provided in these sites. Popularity of the services offered by these sites is assessed through market research. It is observed that only few sites have incorporated market research in their sites.

In majority of e-ticketing sites, presentation feature like real time interactivity and virtual community are observed whereas frames, audio and video files are not observed in most of these sites. Real time interactivity in these sites is observed in the online booking process whereas virtual community is provided through social networking sites. Audio and Video demos of different tour packages, offered by them, would have made these sites more attractive. However, the loading time of these files is high.

All the accessibility features except site evaluation feature is observed in most of the e-ticketing websites. External links observed are mainly to hotel industry and other travel agents. Feedback regarding the site (i.e. site evaluation) is very useful for making the site more attractive and user friendly.

All the informative features are observed in most of the e-ticketing sites. Links to e-markets are the mostly links to Hotel industry, whereby the customer can also book rooms in hotels online.

Assessment of features observed in e-shopping websites

Marketing feature market research is the only item that is not observed in an e-shopping website. This feature would have given knowledge of customer product preferences. Product pages show a range of products of different brands, which is sold through these websites. These pages also display the price for the products. Advertisements of the products sold by these sites and bidding schemes are also observed. Sales promotion is done with the help of advertisements, schemes and discounts offers. Purchase of products in these sites can be done through online order. International e-shopping sites also have country-wise version of their site, which is link to the main site.

Presentation feature real time interactivity is observed in all the e-shopping sites whereas in few sites virtual community feature is also observed. Use of audio, video and frames are not observed in any of the sites. Real time interactivity is exhibited by the purchase process of these sites. In certain sites, virtual community to discuss about the product offered by these sites is also observed. Incorporation of audio and video is avoided in these sites as it makes the site slow.

Site Map is the accessibility feature that is not observed in most of the e-shopping site. This feature gives the structure of the websites. Since the e-shopping sites are user friendly, so absence of site map feature does not make any difference to users. External links are mainly to the company sites whose products are sold in these sites.

Among the informative features, investor relation features are not found in most of the e-shopping websites. Since these websites are intermediaries in web for selling products of other companies, recruitment is not required in few sites. As e-shopping sites earn revenue through transactions of products of other organization, so these sites do not encourage investors.

Assessment of features observed in online trading websites

In an Online Trading Website, all marketing features except link to country sites and market research features are not observed in most of the websites. Products page in these sites displays products like shares, mutual funds, trading, IPOs, etc. Links to the details of these products was dealer locator. Price was the price of these products. Advertisements of different trading schemes offered by these websites were displayed in the sites. Sales Promotion is done through advertisement and discount schemes. Customers can invest in the different products offered by these sites by placing online order. Most of the online trading sites do not have links to any partner site of another country. Feedback on the popularity of products can be gathered through amount of sales of products, so an additional market research is not required for these sites.

As far as Presentation features are concerned, frames are not observed in most of the Online Trading websites. The online investment provision of these sites exhibited real time interactivity. Use of audio and video is in form of demos of the trading process displayed mainly for new users. Virtual community provisions are also observed in some online trading sites that facilitates interaction among the traders of the site.

Except for site evaluation feature, all the other accessibility features are observed in most of the Online Trading sites. Site evaluation enables creation of user friendly sites which can attract more investors.

Informative features like investor relation is not observed in most of the Online Trading websites since investors are the customer of these sites. Links to e-market are the links to financial institutions in which the users invest money online through these sites.

SPECIAL FEATURES OF WEBSITES

Some special features of each class of websites are also observed in the study. Scanning the mail attachments for virus and capacity of inbox are the special features observed in webmail sites. Whereas, free trial software downloads facility is a special feature of IT Company sites. In e-shopping sites, the special feature is shopping cart. Tour packages are the attractions of e-ticketing sites, whereas financial courses feature in Online trading sites.

CONCLUSION

From the study, it is found that all the websites are successful in fulfilling the objectives with which they are launched. Websites forms the interface through which organizations and individuals project themselves in the web, in order to give information about them, market their products and communicate with the users. The attributes considered in the study, measured these parameters, which finally contributed to the role of a website.

The role of a web mail website is to give free mailing facilities to users and to generate revenue by advertising products of different companies. On the other hand, the role of IT Company website is to advertise their products, attract investors and customers and to recruit efficient people from different regions. Role of an e-ticketing website is to generate revenue through sales of services and advertisements. On the other hand, role of e-shopping websites is to promote online selling of products. The role of an Online Trading website is to encourage retail investors to go for investments.

After analyzing the observations on websites, it has been found that online registration must be done for transacting with web mail websites, e-shopping websites, and online trading websites. Use of frames reduces the performance of websites. Site Evaluation feature is important in IT Company websites, e-

shopping websites and online trading sites, as it authenticates these websites. Feedback about the website design has more importance than product feedback. Online support to customers in dealing with product related problems must be emphasized for promotion of the websites. Color combination of a website must be soothing to eyes. Websites must be user friendly and attractive. Spacing between words and paragraphs must be sufficient for proper visibility.

Also, it can be concluded that the attributes derived from literature survey are found to exist in different degrees in the websites studied. However, new attributes can also be considered. New presentation attributes like font size and spacing between works can be added. Also, the identified special attributes for each class of website can be considered to evaluate the quality of those classes of websites in a better way.

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ANNEXURE

TABLE 1: LIST OF WEBSITES OBSERVED FOR THE STUDY

Type of Website	Name of Organisation/ Institute	Website Address
Web Mail	Microsoft Corporation, USA	http://www.hotmail.com
	Yahoo!, USA	http://mail.yahoo.com
	Rediff.com, USA	http://www.rediff.com
	India.com, India	http://mail.india.com
	GMX, India	http://www.gmx.com
	Itimes, India	http://www.itimes.com/login/indiatimes
IT Company	Infosys, Bangalore, India	http://www.infosys.com
	Wipro, India	http://www.wipro.com
	HCL Technologies, India	http://www.hcltech.com
	Microsoft Corporation, USA	http://www.microsoft.com
	IBM, USA	http://www.ibm.com
	Intel Corporation, California, USA	http://www.intel.com
e-ticketing	Jet Airways, India	http://www.jetairways.com
	makemytrip.com, India	http://www.makemytrip.com
	spicejet, India	http://www.spicejet.com
	Tripadvisor, USA	http://www.tripadvisor.com
	Expedia, USA	http://www.expedia.com
	ebookers.com, UK	http://www.ebookers.com
e-shopping	amazon.com, Amazon, USA	http://www.amazon.com
	ebay Inc, USA	http://www.ebay.com
	Shop your World Inc, Singapore	http://www.shopyourworld.com
	flipkart.com, India	http://www.flipkart.com
	indiaplaza, India	http://www.indiaplaza.com
	Jabong.com, India	http://www.jabong.com
Online Trading	ICICI Direct.com, India	http://content.icicidirect.com/newsitecontent/Home/Home.asp
	Sharekhan, India	http://www.sharekhan.com
	India Infoline Ltd., India	http://www.5paisa.com/
	charlesSCHWAB, USA	http://www.schwab.com
	Ameritrade, USA	http://www.tdameritrade.com
	Scottrade, USA	http://www.scottrade.com

TABLE 2: DETAILS OF WEBSITES ATTRIBUTES

Features	Attributes	Details
Marketing	Product Page	The product description by any such means i.e. static page or database search or maintaining a separate sites for individual brands
	Dealer Locator	The variable is true if the site shows the product description by any such means i.e. static page / database search / image maps
	Links to country sites	Links to the sites of a organization specifically dedicated for its operations in another country
	Price	Availability of price information on the products and services offered by the organization
	Advertisement	Advertisements on organization's own products and services
	Sales Promotion	Any functionality to promote organization's product or information on any type of sales promotion activity
	Online Ordering	Facility to procure or order a product or service online
	Customer Support	Any facility provided by the organization to help a customer to select a product or service
Accessibility	Market Research	Any facility (questionnaire survey, opinion poll, etc.) provided by the site to collect data for conducting market research
	Sitemap	A repository and categorization of the links present in the site
	Site Search	Facility to search organization's website for required information
	External Links	Links from the homepage to the pages that are not the part of the concerned site
	Internal Links	Links to the pages that belong to the concerned site
Presentation	Site Evaluation offer	Any facility to get users feedback on website design and facilities offered by the site
	Real Time Interactivity	Chat facility
	Use of Audio	Presence of any audio files
	Use of Video	Presence of any video files
	Use of Frames	Use of frames in the website to divide the user interface to multiple windows
	Page Orientation	The orientation of the home page (landscape/ portrait)
	Graphics	Perceived amount of graphics used (nil/moderate/high)
	Background color	Background color of the homepage
	Foreground color	Text color of the homepage
	Virtual Community	Any facility (discussion groups, user forum, etc.) provided by the site to enable the customers to communicate with each other on the issues related to the products or services offered by the organization
Informative	Profile	General information on organization's history, performance and achievements
	Career	Information on career opportunities and current job openings existing in the organization
	News & Events	Information on current happenings and special events to take place in the near future
	Legal Notice	Legal notice to the users of the website
	Privacy statements	Organization's definition of privacy to be provided to the users of the website
	Investor Relations	Information on organization's financial statement, stock quotes, etc
	FAQ's	List of frequently asked questions on company's product and services
	Links to e-markets	Links to organization's site dedicated for e-business or links to e-markets or portal for the product or service offered by the organization
	Contact	The contact address of various key persons in the organization
Customer Feedback	Any facility (forms, email addresses specifically for the purpose of getting feedback and complaints) provided to the customer to put forward their views, complaints and suggestions on companies products and services	

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