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Abstract

This paper reports a study that examined hotel reservation services on travel websites. Using a systematic search, 90 travel websites were selected with an equal number of North American-based, European-based, and Asia Pacific-based websites. These regions represent the areas of the world with the most Internet users. Based on the developed framework of information quality, the contents of the selected travel websites were evaluated. The empirical results indicated that the travel websites achieved different levels of quality in online information, and that North American-based websites performed significantly better in some attributes.

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By Rob Law and Andrew Cheung

This paper reports a study that examined hotel reservation services on travel websites. Using a systematic search, 90 travel websites were selected with an equal number of North American-based, European-based, and Asia Pacific-based websites. These regions represent the areas of the world with the most Internet users. Based on the developed framework of information quality, the contents of the selected travel websites were evaluated. The empirical results indicated that the travel websites achieved different levels of quality in online information, and that North American-based websites performed significantly better in some attributes.

Introduction

The recent development of Internet technology has attracted many people to turn to this virtual environment to search for information and make online bookings. eTforecast (2005) predicted that there will be 1,466 million Internet users in the world in 2007, up from the 44.6 million in 1995. Nielsen//Rating claimed that there was a 4% increase in the number of Internet users from 2001 to 2002. The growth in Internet applications is not merely in number of users but also in business revenues. It has been found that the growth in retail e-commerce in the first quarter of 2005 was 24% on a year-over-year basis. The direct relationship between vendors and customers on the Internet directly reflects the situation in the travel and tourism industry. Various statistical data have shown that there is a large demand for using the Internet for travel and tourism. HarrisInteractive (2002) found that travel is one of the largest e-commerce applications in 2001. In the same way, Valhouli (2003) stated that online travel and tourism is the fastest growing and leading business in e-commerce, comprising about half of all online sales. In addition, after airfares, hotel room reservations are the second-largest source of online reservations in the travel and tourism industry, with an estimated transaction volume of US\$17.5 billion in 2005, up from US\$6.3 billion in 2002. Similarly, Greenspan (2003) stated that the share of hotel room sales from traditional travel agencies will drop from 21% in 2001 to 18% in 2005. Starkov and Price (2005) further predicted that over 50% of all hotel bookings will be performed online in 2009. When reservations are made, most travelers prefer third-party travel websites to hotel sites. Likewise, TravelCLICK (2004) showed that travel agency websites are the most frequently used online channel for hotel bookings.

In spite of the increasing popularity of online bookings for hotel rooms, there have been few published articles on the contents of hotel reservations on travel agency websites. The most closely related study, to the knowledge of the authors, was the one conducted in 2001 to compare the contents of 60 travel websites in Asia and North America. However, 20% of the selected websites in that study did not function properly. To reflect the fast-changing nature of the online travel industry and to achieve a broader geographical representation, this study aims to examine the hotel reservation services on selected travel websites based in North America, the Asia-Pacific region, and Europe. According to the Internet World Stats (2005), 90% of Internet users in the world are from these three regions. Therefore, the findings of this study are expected to help both consumers and practitioners better understand the hotel booking services that are available on travel websites in different regions.

Having introduced in the previous paragraphs the background of this study, the next section reviews the growth of online applications in general and those relating to

the hospitality and tourism industries in particular. The section after that discusses the methodology used in this study, the development of the framework of information quality for hotel reservations on travel websites, and the sampling and data collection processes. An empirical results section that analyzes the research findings is then presented. A discussion section follows which offers an overview of the study. The last section summarizes the study, and suggests opportunities for future research.

Online Hotel and Tourism Applications

Ever since the removal in the early 1990s of requirements for official support to join the Internet, there has been a proliferation of Internet applications in business in general and in the hospitality and tourism industries in particular. Such a proliferation is primarily attributed to ongoing improvements in network technology, the low cost of acquiring personal computers, and the increasing competitiveness of online prices. More specifically, the Internet enables e-travelers to search for information and purchase products or services through direct interactions with online businesses. As such, the purchases that consumers make are primarily based on the cyberspace appearance of the product, such as pictures, images, and video clips, not on actual contact with the product. For this reason, the promise of electronic business and online shopping depends, to a great extent, on the users' perceptions of the availability of services. Moreover, their overall perceptions on the presentation of information, ease of navigation, and order fulfillment in an interactive medium are all important factors in building an e-business that do not exist in the traditional retailing environment.

The Internet provides an unprecedented communications link for the flow of information by improving the efficiency, accuracy, and accessibility of websites for global e-travelers. Similarly, hospitality and tourism businesses can deliver their information to suppliers, vendors, customers, and employees throughout the entire value chain.

In travel and tourism, statistics have shown that two-thirds of Internet users used the Internet to plan trips, and with slightly more than one-third of these users having subsequently made a purchase. In the United States alone, more than 64 million people, representing 67% of all travelers, used the Internet in 2003 to search for travel-related information, and more than 42 million of these travelers actually made an online purchase afterwards. This was an 8% increase over the previous year. Lastly, 29% of online bookers made all their travel arrangements online in 2003, and 11% of online travelers had made a spontaneous trip because of e-mail promotions or offers. All of these figures indicate a promising demand for Internet applications in travel and tourism.

The exponential growth of Internet access provides an entirely new means for tourism and hospitality businesses to create a sustainable competitive advantage in the global marketplace. Therefore, most, if not all, businesses have established an online presence in order to gain a share of the market. Through e-business, hospitality and tourism practitioners can take advantage of Internet technology by expanding their market opportunities, improving their efficiency, and having more productive operations. Inevitably, the emergence of Internet technology will change (and possibly reduce) the role played by costly physical infrastructure or distribution networks in making it possible for hospitality and tourism businesses to penetrate into a geographical area. With virtual storefronts, online catalogues, and network security for purchases on the Web, websites serve as an ideal channel for e-travelers to make their online queries and purchases without any geographical and time constraints.

Methodology

The methodology used in this study comprised a detailed content analysis of the online hotel reservation services that were available on the selected travel websites.

Prior to the website evaluation process and drawing on the findings of prior studies, a framework on website information quality was formulated, which hypothesized that the overall quality of information on a travel website is determined by the dimensions of; i) information completeness, ii) navigation quality, and iii) ease of use. The first dimension refers to the extent to which users can find the information they need to make a reservation; whereas the second dimension relates to the simplicity of moving around on the website and whether the website generally works well. The last dimension generally concerns the organization of the website, and the availability of simple and clear directions for use. Each of these dimensions further consists of multiple attributes that measure the availability of specific functions or services on a website.

An initial list of attributes for the proposed framework was developed by adapting related prior studies. The developed list of attributes was then reviewed at the end of 2004 by a group of 30 experienced online travelers using a Delphi method. After three rounds of evaluations, the participants finally agreed to a list of 23 attributes. Three of these attributes further consisted of sub-attributes. The first dimension consisted of eight attributes, the second dimension had nine attributes, and the remaining six attributes were in the last dimension.

Prior to the actual selection of travel websites, the most popular search engines of Google, Yahoo, and MSN were tested in January 2005 for the lists of results that they returned when the keywords "online travel booking" were inputted. Although Google returned the largest number of matches, its maximum number of displayed matches was less than that of Yahoo. The same result was obtained when the word "hotel" was added to the list of keywords. Hence, Yahoo was chosen as the search engine for selecting the travel websites used for analysis.

Using Yahoo, a total of 90 travel websites that offer online reservation services for hotels and airfares were chosen using a systematic sequential search from the list of returned virtual links. In this study, 30 North American-based travel websites were first selected. The selection was determined by the location of the headquarters of the travel websites or the target destinations served by the websites. The same process was also applied to the 30 selected Asia Pacific-based and 30 European-based travel websites. To rectify the problem of accessing errors that was encountered by a similar study, only workable websites that provided at least online reservation services for hotels and airfares were included. Table 1 lists the 90 selected websites, and the next section presents the empirical findings of the website evaluations.

Table 1:

The Selected Travel Websites

1	www.expedia.com	www.manningtravel.co.uk	travel.indiatimes.com
3	www.travelocity.com	www.easyt.se	www.anytours.com.hk
3	www.orbitz.com	www.travel-market.dk	www.fastnet.com.au
4	www.itn.net	www.mytravellite.com	www.travel.com.hk
5	www.tiss.com	www.lonsdaletravel.co.uk	www.zuji.com.hk
6	www.travelweb.com	www.a3btravel.com	www.arrowtravel.com.hk
7	www.travelonline.us	www.reservetravel.co.uk	www.chinatravell.com
8	www.viptraveldeals.com	www.ebookers.com	www.asiatravelmart.com
9	www.universal-travel.com	www.opodo.de	www.morethailand.com
10	www.taca.com	www.amadeus.net	www.goa3u.com
11	www.lodging.com	www.kilroytravels.dk	www.etravelgate.com
13	www.hotwire.com	www.thomascook.co.uk	www.chinaetravel.com
13	www.travelbookingonline.com	www.eazy-travel-spain.net	www.citiwelltravels.com
14	www.tixtravel.com	www.thomson.co.uk	www.priceline.com.hk
15	www.airwise.com	www.travelline.co.uk	www.ooschina.com
16	www.travelersnet.com	www.airline-network.co.uk	www.webjet.com.au
17	www.cheaptickets.com	www.deckchair.com	www.liberty-travel.net
18	www.travels-web.com	www.onlinetravel.com	www.welcometravels.com
19	www.cbw.com	www.yespleasebookit.com	www.naxtravels.com
30	www.travelnow.com	www.flightfind.co.uk	www.impressions.com.my
31	www.bmdtravel.com	www.hotelsreservation.co.uk	chaintravel.advantage4travel.com
33	www.gonow.ca	www.firstchoice.co.uk	www.11thhourvacations.com
33	www.lastminute.com	www.bargainholidays.com	www.3waytravel.com
34	www.trazura.com	www.eztrip.com	www.4thetravel.com
35	www.bookingscompany.com	www.korculainfo.co.uk	www.airfare.com.au
36	www.economytravel.com	www.traveloverland.de	www.amextravel.com.hk
37	www.searstravel.ca	www.travelukonline.com	www.bidontravel.com
38	www.travelape.com	www.lastminutos.com	www.chinatraveller.com
39	www.travelhero.com	www.rejsefeber.dk	www.e-ticket-travel.com.au
30	www.voyagenow.com	morrisontravel1.vacation.com	www.e-tour.com.cn

Results and Analysis

The website evaluation process took place in the period from March to May of 2005, during which each of the selected websites was examined and checked for the availability of services or functions pertaining to the 23 attributes in the three

dimensions of the developed framework. Tables 2 to 4 present the evaluative empirical findings for the 90 websites.

Table 2:

Results of Completeness of Information

Variables	Number and Percentage of Website Offers						χ^2	d.f.	Sig.	
	Asia Pacific (n=30)		Europe (n=30)		N. America (n=30)					
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%				
Member										
Not necessary	26	86.67	26	86.67	20	66.67	1.47	2	.083	
Necessary before an information search	0	0	1	3.33	1	3.33	8			
Necessary after the information search & reservation stage	4	13.33	3	10	9	30				
Advanced search										
Yes	22	73.33	20	66.67	23	76.67	.30	1	.192	
No	8	26.67	10	33.33	7	23.33				
Room rate discounts										
Yes	2	6.67	1	3.33	4	13.33	.078	1	.346	
No	28	93.33	29	96.67	26	86.67				
Special promotions										
Yes	5	16.67	1	3.33	7	23.33	.311	1	.082	
No	25	83.33	29	96.67	23	76.67				
Extra bonus for repeat customers										
Yes	2	6.67	2	6.67	7	23.33	.278	1	0.07	
No	28	93.33	28	93.33	23	76.67			6	
Availability of regulations and rules										
Yes	25	83.33	25	83.33	30	100	.278	1	0.06	
No	5	16.67	5	16.67	0	0				
Summary of selected itineraries										
Yes	16	53.33	22	73.33	28	93.33	1.2	1	0.002*	
No	14	46.67	8	26.67	2	6.67				
Customer support										
Local	Yes	29	96.67	30	100	30	100	.011	1	0.37
	No	1	3.33	0	0	0	0			2
International	Yes	10	33.33	14	46.67	15	50	.233	1	0.39
	No	20	66.67	16	53.33	15	50			5
24 hours	Yes	3	10	4	13.33	11	36.67	.144	1	0.34
	No	27	90	26	86.67	19	63.33			1
Remarks:										
* significant at $\alpha=0.05$										

Completeness of Information

Eight attributes were included in the dimension of information completeness. Table 2 shows that the North American-based websites had the highest percentage of offerings in most of the attributes than their Asia Pacific-based and European-based counterparts. A significant difference among the three regions was seen with respect of the attribute of the summary of selected itineraries. In particular, 53% of the Asia Pacific-based websites offered this function, whereas the corresponding figures for European-based and North American-based websites were 73% and 93%, respectively.

Table 3:

Results of Navigation Quality										
Number and Percentage of Website Offers										
	Asia Pacific (n=30)		Europe (n=30)		N. America (n=30)					
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	χ^2	d.f.	Sig.	
Free entry of destinations										
Yes	13	43.33	21	70	29	96.67	2.13	1	0.000*	
No	17	56.67	9	30	1	3.33	3			
Free entry of check-in / out date										
Yes	26	86.67	30	100	29	96.67	.144	1	0.06	
No	4	13.33	0	0	1	3.33			4	
Warning of incorrect date / time entry										
Yes	26	86.67	30	100	28	93.33	.133	1	0.12	
No	4	13.33	0	0	2	6.67				
Date/time not available for booking										
Yes	3	10	1	3.33	1	3.33	.044	1	0.43	
No	27	90	29	96.67	29	96.67			8	
Ability to choose hotel environment										
Yes	8	26.67	17	56.67	22	73.33	1.67	1	0.001*	
No	22	73.33	13	43.33	8	26.67	8			
Number of travelers										
Yes	23	76.67	22	73.33	28	93.33	.344	1	0.10	
No	7	23.33	8	26.67	2	3.33			8	
Hotel preference										
Chain hotel	Yes	4	13.33	6	20	17	56.67	1.63	1	0.000*
	No	26	86.67	24	80	13	43.33	3		
Independent hotel	Yes	3	10	4	13.33	3	10	.011	1	0.89
	No	27	90	26	86.67	27	90			7
Motel / Inn / others	Yes	1	3.33	2	6.67	5	16.67	.144	1	0.17
	No	29	96.67	28	93.33	25	83.33			2
Hotel choices										
Less than 5	0	0	0	0	1	3.33	.011	3	.932	
Between 5-10	5	16.67	4	13.33	3	10				
More than 10	25	83.33	26	86.67	26	86.67				
Nil	0	0	0	0	0	0				
Choices of hotel class										
Yes	20	66.67	24	80	20	66.67	.178	1	.43	
No	10	33.33	6	20	10	33.33				
Remarks:										
* significant at $\alpha=0.05$										

Table 4:

Results of Ease of Use

Number and Percentage of Website Offers										
		Asia Pacific (n=30)		Europe (n=30)		N. America (n=30)		χ^2	d.f.	Sig.
		No.	%	No.	%	No.	%			
Room rate selection										
Less than 2		9	30	8	26.67	5	16.67	.844	3	.161
Between 2-5		15	50	19	63.33	19	63.33			
More than 5		4	13.33	3	10	6	20			
Nil		2	6.67	0	0	0	0			
Choices of amenities										
Yes		7	23.33	13	43.33	11	36.67	.311	1	.259
No		23	76.67	17	56.67	19	63.33			
Reservation steps to follow										
Yes		30	100	30	100	29	96.67	.011	1	.372
No		0	0	0	0	1	3.33			
Assistance for reservation and payment										
Yes		30	100	30	100	29	96.67	.011	1	.372
No		0	0	0	0	1	3.33			
Secure payment system - message display										
Yes		28	93.33	28	93.33	29	96.67	.011	1	.814
No		2	6.67	2	6.67	1	3.33			
Payment option										
Credit card	Yes	30	100	30	100	30	100			
	No	0	0	0	0	0	0			
E-Payment	Yes	0	0	0	0	0	0			
	No	30	100	30	100	30	100			
Offline payment	Yes	6	20	0	0	3	10	.344	1	.007*
	No	24	80	30	100	27	90			
Remarks:										
* significant at $\alpha=0.05$										

Quality of Navigation

Somewhat similar to the first dimension, North American websites generally provided more services than other websites with regard to the attributes in the second dimension (Table 3). In addition, significant differences were found for the attributes of free entry of destinations and ability to choose hotel environment, and the sub-attribute of chain hotel in hotel preference. More specifically, only 43% of the Asia Pacific-based websites enabled their users to enter their destinations freely, but 70% of the European-based and 90% of the North American-based websites had offered this service to their users. Similarly, only 27% of the Asia Pacific-based websites allowed their users to choose a nearby hotel environment, such as one near the airport or a shopping arcade but such a service was made available on 57% and 73% of the European-based and North American-based websites, respectively. Lastly, 13% and 20% of the Asia Pacific-based and European-based websites provided the service of selecting chain hotels, but the corresponding number for North American-based websites was 57%. All of these findings showed the superiority of North American-based websites in terms of quality of navigation.

Ease of Use

A comparable performance in terms of the availability of online services among the three regions was generally seen with the six attributes included in the dimension of ease of use. In other words, the selected websites achieved a similar level of service provision with regard to ease of use. The only significant difference was found in the sub-attribute of offline payment. None of the European-based websites offered this service but the service was available on 20% and 10% of the Asia Pacific-based and North American-based websites, respectively.

Discussion

Generally speaking, most websites provided an adequate level of reservation service for the included attributes. Travel websites normally do not require users to be members to search for information, although only registered members can proceed after searching for information on a few websites. Such an outcome is not unexpected, as travel websites would have protective measures to reduce potential risks. An example of such a protective measure is the use of credit cards for online payment.

It is somewhat surprising to note that the majority of selected travel websites did not provide any room rate discounts and special promotions. This absence of discounts could be attributed to the seasonal pattern during the data collection stage. Jeong, however, has advocated the importance of putting enough emphasis on the purchase motivation on hotel websites. Travel websites should therefore consider offering discounted rates to their users. Also, it is interesting to note that many websites had claimed that the room rates for their recommended hotels were the lowest. Hospitality and tourism researchers and practitioners have been touting the importance of customer loyalty, but the empirical findings of this study show that few incentive schemes are in place to attract repeat customers. It seems that low room rates are the commonly used practice to induce consumers to make a purchase. Another notable finding relating to the issue of completeness of information is insufficient customer support. This is especially true for the Asia Pacific-based websites which primarily provide local support with limited working hours.

The superiority of service provision for North American-based websites basically extends to quite a few attributes in the dimension of navigation quality. The performance of the attributes in the dimension of ease of use was fairly similar among the websites in the three regions. As expected, credit cards were the mostly commonly accepted means of payment but it was a bit surprising to note that none of the websites accepted e-payments such e-cash or e-checks.

The dissimilarities among the websites of the three regions could be attributed to the nature of the websites and their target customers. North America, being the leading provider of Internet technology, was able to provide the most comprehensive level of hotel reservation services on their websites. European-based websites also closely matched their North American counterparts. Asia Pacific-based websites, however, were still lagging behind in quite a few attributes. Such results, however, are not unexpected as prior studies on Internet usage have revealed the existence of geographical and cultural differences.

Concluding Comments

This study has examined the extent to which the selected travel websites could provide online hotel reservation services based on the developed framework of information quality. Apparently, people can use the Internet to search for and book their hotel rooms without much difficulty on travel websites. Still, the empirical findings showed the existence of disparities among the websites of different regions. The findings of this research are, therefore, expected to help hospitality and tourism practitioners to better understand the performance of their websites as compared to the

international standard. Appropriate Internet strategy resolutions can then be formulated accordingly. According to Starkov and Price, it is important for hoteliers to continuously re-evaluate their exposure in indirect online distribution channels. A comprehensive search engine marketing strategy should be performed as 80% of overall website visits begin from a search engine or directory service.

Although the findings could be of use to the industry, the limited scope of the examined websites makes it difficult to come to any generalized conclusions about hotel reservations on travel websites. Therefore, a natural extension of this research would be to include more travel websites, and to conduct a more comprehensive overview of the reservation services. In addition, other reservation services such as airfares and car rentals could be examined in future studies. Lastly, since Internet technology is changing rapidly, it would be beneficial to repeat the study in a longitudinal way in order to observe the changes over a period of time.

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