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'BEAUTY LIES IN THE EYES OF THE BEHOLDER':WHY AND HOW ISLAND TOURISTS LOOK AT SMTE WEBSITES

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ABSTRACT

This research examined the information needs of small and medium tourism enterprise (SMTE) customers sampled from two popular island destinations in the Indian Ocean. It also identified their motivations and inhibitions in using the Internet. A study of the website navigation behavior showed that the appeal mix and multimedia mix features were accessed more than the offering mix features. The association between the tourism products bought online and the purchase motivations was mapped using correspondence analysis. The online buyers of 'accommodation' and 'attractions' were motivated by transactional objectives while the 'access' and auxiliary product buyers by informational uses.

Keywords: Tourist information needs, online motivations and inhibitions, SMTE websites, website navigation

INTRODUCTION

The Internet has outpaced traditional sources of information on tourist destinations within the short period of its existence, resulting in inquisitive, searching, discerning and independent tourists. Characterized by the ease of access and wealth of information, it has contributed to the emergence of tourism and travel consumers who prefer to search for holidays themselves online, rather than through travel agents. A do-it-yourself (DIY) phenomenon has resulted in which offline trade intermediaries are being replaced by direct online interfaces of the tourism service providers [2]. This study examines the information needs, online motivations and inhibitions of the SMTE customers sampled from two popular island destinations in the Indian Ocean.

CONTEXT AND RATIONALE

According to the UNCTAD's Information economy report [21], the number of international tourism arrivals is expected to increase by 4.1 per cent annually to reach close to 1.6 billion international arrivals by 2020. Among the destinations, islands are among the most visited [10] and tourism in these islands is dominated by SMTEs [1]. Technology provides unprecedented opportunities for the coordination of SMTEs at the local level to provide a seamless tourism product in order to enrich the total customer satisfaction. It enhances business efficiency by empowering organizations with economies of scope [7]. It also offers new opportunities to offset several competitive disadvantages of SMTEs [13]. The Internet impact has been felt not only by the supply side, but also the demand side. One of the key ongoing changes in consumer behavior has been the transition from a passive reacting subject to the so-called "postmodern" consumer, one who is creative and innovative and who interacts and initiates experiences, shaping his/her own shopping experience [16].

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The relevant literature can be classified into three areas, namely study of online customer profile (who), intention (why) and behavior (how). While such a compartmentalization is tidy, it also reveals certain gaps which this study attempts to fill.

Online customer profile

Many studies have been conducted to profile the typical online user using the demographic characteristics. The typical Internet user of the Twentieth century is young, professional, and affluent with higher levels of income and higher education [18] [12]. They value time more than money which automatically makes the working population and dual-income or single-parent households with time constraints, better candidates for non-store retailers to target [8]. Internet usage history and intensity also affect online shopping potential. Consumers with longer histories of Internet usage are educated and equipped with better skills and perceptions of the Web environment [20] [15].

Online customer intention

Researches studying the intention of the online users in business-to-customer (B2C) e-commerce context have lead to identifying the motivations and inhibitions of the users. In the travel context many components may make up for the travel experience and therefore the combination of convenience, immediacy, lower prices and rich information is highly effective [12] [4]. The most frequently cited reasons for not purchasing travel products online are, in the order of precedence: credit card security, no assessment of product quality, privacy issues and 'rather purchase locally' [22].

Many consider the lack of trust to be a very significant factor affecting intention to purchase from the Web. Discussion has focused mainly on security of transactions, privacy of customers' personal information and general trust in the vendor of whom the customer has not any prior experience [11]. Factors that limit online shopping include as difficulties in navigating the Internet and limited offerings of individual sites, lack of price competitiveness and disappointment with customer services [14].

Online consumer behavior

Despite the growing importance of the Internet as an information source for travelers, as a marketing tool and as a way of doing business, there is a general lack of behavioral studies on how these travelers use the Internet for information, booking and purchase of travel products and services. Consumers are able to gather information about products and services on the

Internet [19], but the information gathering capability of the online consumer can profoundly affect behavior through changes in market dynamics [6]. The more consequential the purchase decision, the more time and effort consumers are willing to expend to search for information that they believe will lead to a good decision [3].

The travel decision-making process is a complex multi-stage process layered along a hierarchical set of activities [9]. Here too, convenience can serve as a key driver of the travel planning process. On the Internet, consumers can self-build a combination of various complementary travel products with relatively less difficulty when compared to the traditional context. But the Internet can also add to the complexity of the process because of the plethora of sources to coordinate and piece together.

This study revisits the online tourist motivations and inhibitions by comparing the tourists from two different destinations with diverse destination positioning. While several of the behavioral studies have been based on intentions and perceptions, this study takes into account, the online tourists' actions.

RESEARCH PROBLEM

Despite the fact that online tourism and travel sales are now a substantial and growing proportion of total sales in one of the world's largest industries, there still exists a lack of comprehensive literature on the online tourist behavior and little or no analysis that looks at the SMTEs websites through the eyes of the tourists. The aim of this research is to establish the information needs of the SMTE customers. The research questions are: Who are the visitors to SMTE websites? What brings them to the SMTE websites? What do they do there? To provide answers to these questions, the research objectives are:

- To profile (in terms of demographic characteristics) the international tourists visiting the two island destinations
- To assess the tourists' level of satisfaction with online search and with online purchase
- To find out the motivations and inhibitions for online search and for online purchase
- To identify the website features/activities that are noticed by and used by the tourists
- To analyze the online purchase motivations for different tourism product categories

This research has certain limitations. First of all, it is specific to place (Andaman Islands, India and Mauritius, Indian Ocean) and time (the year 2005). In the Andaman Islands, the original data collection plan had to be rescheduled in the aftermath of the December 2004 Tsunami tragedy. Since the market is fragmented, there is a need for more focused studies on specific market segments (say, the honeymooners) with regard to their Internet usage. Future studies may investigate the preferences of Internet users for tourism and travel products, so that more personalized products can be designed to cater to different market segments. This offline study of online behavior may suffer from data error. Hence the actual online behavior may be studied from click-stream data and be corroborated with the professed behavior for greater accuracy.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

To study the online motivations, inhibitions and behavior of the tourists at the SMTE websites promoting Island Tourism, two prominent island destinations, namely the Andaman Islands, India and Mauritius in the Indian Ocean were chosen as the study locations. Endowed with identical natural resources and attractions, these destinations differ in terms of their tourism infrastructure development and marketing strategy. In terms of destination positioning, Mauritius follows a high-value-low-volume strategy while Andaman Islands follow a high-volume-low-value strategy.

The primary data for this study was collected from the international tourists visiting either of the two island destinations. The sample inclusion criterion was that the respondents be customers to the SMTEs in these island destinations. 40 SMTEs (representing accommodation, access, attraction and auxiliary product categories) with a web presence were identified (through a disproportionate stratified sampling) as the data collection spots. 200 international tourists were approached and 190 complete responses were collected. A detailed questionnaire was developed after an extensive review of the relevant literature on online consumer behavior, and it was used for collecting data through personal interviews. The questionnaire consisted of six sections that asked the respondents about the purpose of visit to the destination, motivation for using the Internet for information and shopping, inhibition in not using the Internet for information and shopping, navigation behavior at SMTE websites, satisfaction/dissatisfaction with the use of Internet for travel information and shopping and demographic information. A pre-test of the questionnaire was carried out with 20 respondents for clarity, practicability and reliability. The pre-test did not indicate any problems. Sufficient precautions were taken to avoid sample bias. SPSS (version 12.0) was used for data analysis.

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

Characteristics of Internet and non-Internet users

Table 1 describes the respondents in terms of their demography, purpose of visit and annual spending on tourism and travel. Among the 190 tourists surveyed, 160 were Internet users and 30 were non-Internet users. Pearson chi-square tests were used to examine if any significant differences existed between Internet and non-Internet users. Results showed that Internet and non-Internet users differed in terms of travel purpose. Further investigation revealed that the honeymoon travelers and adventure tourists were typically internet users. Apart from this, no significant differences existed in the demographic characteristics between internet users and non-users among the respondents. Non-internet users were likely to be older and traveled for holiday purposes compared to the Internet users. Majority of the respondents (37.5 per cent in Internet user category and 40 per cent in non-Internet user category) were in the age group 31-40 years. Nearly 83 per cent of the respondents were at least degree holders in terms of education. Compared to non-Internet users, more Internet users lived in urban areas. Among the surveyed tourists, 15.8 per cent have not accessed the Internet at all for any tourism/travel related search for reasons like 'unfamiliar technology', 'internet is too crowded', distrust for online information and comfort level with the regular offline options.

Table 1. Demographic and behavioral characteristics of Internet and non-Internet users

| Characteristics | All sample (n = 190) % | Internet users (n = 160) | | | Non-Internet users (n = 30) % | df | p |
		Surfers only (n = 74) %	Surfers & Shoppers (n = 86) %	TOTAL (n=160) %			
Age							
21-30	31.1	36.5	29.1	32.5	23.3	3	0.480
31-40	37.9	36.5	38.4	37.5	40.0		
41-50	21.1	21.6	17.4	19.4	30.0		
> 50	10.0	5.4	15.1	10.6	6.7		
Education							
< degree	16.8	17.6	16.3	16.9	16.7	2	0.699
Degree	46.3	50.0	45.3	47.5	40.0		
> degree	36.8	32.4	38.4	35.6	43.3		
Living area							
Urban	41.6	32.4	51.2	42.5	36.7	2	0.838
Semi-urban	40.0	47.3	32.6	39.4	43.3		
Rural	18.4	20.3	16.3	18.1	20.0		
Purpose							
Holiday	35.8	39.2	29.1	33.8	46.7	4	0.020
Adventure tourism	42.1	39.2	50.0	45.0	26.7		
Visiting Friends	5.8	4.1	3.5	3.8	16.7		
Honeymoon	8.4	9.5	9.3	9.4	3.3		
Others	7.9	8.1	8.1	8.1	6.7		
Spending							
< $5000	48.4	47.3	46.5	47.3	56.7	3	0.722
$5000-10000	24.7	25.7	25.6	25.7	20.0		
$10000-15000	16.3	20.3	12.8	16.3	16.7		
> $15000	10.5	6.8	15.1	11.3	6.7		

Level of and reasons for satisfaction with online search and with online purchase

The tourists' level of satisfaction was more for online search than for online purchase. It was also found out that online buyers were more satisfied with their online search. Further chi-square test revealed that online search satisfaction leads to future intention to purchase online.

The dominant reasons for satisfaction with online purchase included the confidence inspired (in terms of definite and complete information) by the transaction, the ability to buy customized tourism products, getting better prices online and the efficiency of the transaction itself. The major reasons for dissatisfaction with online purchase were the lack of online payment security information, poor after-sales service and the mismatch between the online promise and the offline delivery.

Motivations and inhibitions for online search and for online purchase

At a fundamental level, the motivation theory contends that cognitive or affective motives seek individual gratification and satisfaction [17]. In the given online context, the most important reasons for consumers to search online were the ease of information gathering, perceived availability of cheaper deals and the wealth of information. The major reasons for online purchase were found to be convenient transactions, cheaper deals and the confidence inspired by the on-site experience.

Nearly 46 per cent of the respondents searched online but have not purchased any tourism/travel products online. Several factors inhibit their online purchases. The issue of information privacy and transaction security is the biggest inhibitor for a consumer to purchase online. Interestingly, the subsequent reasons highlight the 'personal touch' desired by the consumer with the vendor and the limited interactivity in an online transaction as inhibitors to purchase online. About 7 per cent of the respondents indicated that the SMTE websites were not e-commerce enabled and hence they could not purchase online.

Online consumer behavior

The respondents came to know of the SMTE websites from online as well as offline sources. The online sources of information in the order of precedence were: search engines, hyperlinks in other websites, online ads and word of mouse. The offline sources included marketing communications, word of mouth, tourist guide books, trade intermediaries and travel fairs. The online sources informed more people than the offline sources. Word of mouth/mouse and tourist guide books were popular

sources concerning Andaman Islands whereas online ads and hyperlinks were popular concerning Mauritius. The on-site behavior of the respondents was studied by asking for the website features that were noticed by and also used by them. Among the website features noticed by the respondents, 'Places to see' or 'things to do' was the most noticed followed by price-related information and company information. Among the website features used by the respondents, the informational features dominate over the transactional features on a website. Among the website contents, the multimedia mix elements had a higher noticed-to-used ratio compared to offering mix and appeal mix elements. Among the actions taken by the tourists after completing a search on the Internet, it was interesting to note offline purchase following an online search in many of the responses. Among the tourism products purchased online, the accommodation sector ranked first, followed by the 'access' sector and the 'attractions' sector. A Pearson chi-square test indicated significant differences between the destinations and the online purchase of 'attractions' and auxiliary product categories.

Association between tourism products purchased online and the purchase motivations

Correspondence analysis depicts associations between two or more categorical variables. Table 2 represents a contingency table showing the frequencies of a two-way cross tabulation matrix comprising tourism products bought (four levels) and online purchase motivations (six levels). Figure 1 represents the correspondence map as a joint plot of tourism products bought online and the buying motivations involved. Correspondence analysis procedure from SPSS (version 12) was performed.

Table 2. Correspondence Table

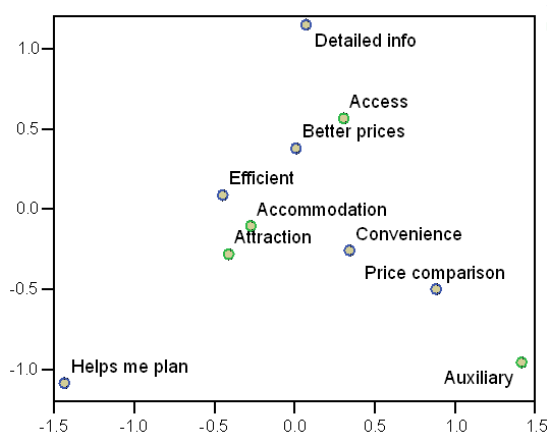| Type of product bought online	Online buying motivation						
	Convenience	Efficient	Better prices	Price comparison	Detailed information	Helps me plan	Active Margin
Accommodation	17	18	11	3	2	3	54
Access/Travel	17	14	17	5	5	0	58
Attractions	14	15	12	4	2	5	52
Auxillary products	7	1	2	3	0	0	13
Active Margin	55	48	42	15	9	8	177

Figure 1. Correspondence map (Joint plot of tourism products bought online and the buying motivations)

It indicated that the online shopping motivations for different tourism/travel products are distinctively different. Among the buyers of 'accommodation' and 'attractions' products, the primary online purchase motivations were convenience and efficiency of the transaction. Motivations like 'better prices' and 'detailed info' dominate for 'access' products and 'price comparison' for auxiliary products. In general, the online buyers of 'accommodation' and 'attractions' were motivated by transactional objectives while the 'access' and auxiliary product buyers by informational uses.

DISCUSSION OF RESULTS AND IMPLICATIONS

Few important findings emerge from this study. There seems to be a difference between Internet and non-Internet users in terms of certain demographic and purchase characteristics. Honeymooners and adventure tourists are more likely to be Internet users. This finding can help SMTEs to target their e-marketing communications to these groups. SMTEs can cooperate at the destination level in order to increase their total competitiveness as a destination or as the total tourism product [7]. Among the online sources of information about SMTE websites, search engines ranked first, followed by links in other websites, online ads and word of mouse. As a result, it becomes imperative for a SMTE website to be search engine optimized and also be 'connected' to other related websites. In a study of SMTE's e-marketing pay-off, the search engine optimized websites provided better returns on investment [1]. In terms of the top of the mind awareness about tourism and travel related websites, the popular travel portals scored high followed by special interest sites like scubadiving.com. SMTEs would profit much by participating in the affiliate network of such special interest sites. For example, mauritiuswedding.com is a niche site offering wedding photography services to tourists visiting Mauritius for their wedding and honeymoon. A small or medium enterprise in the accommodation sector will do well to place a link in mauritiuswedding.com and be found by a honeymooner.

The study found out that online search satisfaction led to online purchase or at least a future intention. Interestingly, less number of respondents was satisfied with online purchase compared to online search. The SMTEs ought to take note of the reasons for online purchase satisfaction as well as dissatisfaction. The reasons for satisfaction range from pre-purchase through purchase to post-purchase benefits. The pre-purchase benefits like the confidence inspired (in terms of definite and complete information) lead the pack. The ability to deal directly with the service provider and obtaining a customized product (instead of having to choose from a standard menu) had delighted many respondents. The lesson for SMTES is to load their websites with comprehensive, clear-cut and up-to-date information, offer product customization freedom and provide different approaches for tasks (for example a 'walk-me-through' approach instead of a 'do-it-yourself' approach for complicated tasks). The online purchase dissatisfaction set in due to lack of secure payment information, poor after-sales service (for example, lack of communication) and online-promise-offline-delivery gap. The SMTES need to address these. A relationship-orientation rather than transaction-orientation helps to retain the consumers. The website must be considered as a virtual portrayal of reality at the destination in order to minimize the promise-delivery gap.

The motivations and inhibitions for online search and purchase reveal the consumers' perceptions. Apart from the easily gathered and rich information in an online search, 'looking for cheaper deals' motivates the search. An SMTE site with an easy-to-navigate layout, detailed click-through information, price information and guarantees and useful utilities like currency converter can excite the visitor. Transaction convenience and cheaper deals were the top reasons for online purchase. SMTEs should facilitate the assembly a personal holiday plan in the 24∗7 convenience of one's home at the click of a mouse. SMTEs need to pay attention to why surfers do not end up as shoppers. The study identified the inhibitions of such surfers and highlighted information privacy and transaction security as the biggest concerns. SMTE websites need to have a privacy policy in place and posted on the site. A secure payment gateway can do away with lot of fears to transact online. 'Lack of personal touch' emerged as another inhibitor. Alternative contact methods (such as online chat or phone) can bring in the much needed personal touch and interactivity. A small percentage of the respondents pointed to the lack of e-commerce enabled SMTE websites for not purchasing tourism products online.

The on-site behavior of the tourists revealed that the multimedia mix elements (such as maps, pictures and video clips) enjoyed a higher noticed-to-used ratio compared to offering mix and appeal mix elements. It gives clue to SMTEs on the site content. Intriguingly, features like intra-site search and online ads received very little attention. The on-site activities reveal a goal-directed behavior since 'places to see' or 'things to do' ranked high on both noticed and used website features. Based on the post-search behavior, an SMTE site should be part of an integrated marketing communication as a visitor may follow up an online search by establishing an offline contact directly or indirectly (say, through the DMO contact office). Among the tourism products purchased online, the accommodation sector ranked first, followed by the 'access' and 'attractions' sectors. An SMTE in the accommodation sector can create cross-selling opportunities with the other sectors.

A correspondence analysis (Figure 2) identified the online purchase motivations for different tourism product categories. Transactional objectives motivated accommodation and 'attractions' buyers while informational uses motivated the 'access' and auxiliary product buyers. The correspondence map delineates travel components based on consumer perceptions of situational criteria [5]. For example, flights and car rentals are relatively more established sectors in the online travel segment. The 'access' sector has greater price transparency, which drives consumers to seek more evaluative information on that front. On the other hand, consumers attach more importance to transaction convenience and efficiency to SMTE services (such as accommodations and attractions) that are not so established. The SMTEs offering different tourism products should be aware of and be responsive to the online purchase motivations of the tourists.

In terms of destination positioning, Mauritius follows a high-value, low-volume strategy whereas Andaman Islands follow a low-value, high-volume strategy. Looking into the sources of information about SMTE websites, Andaman Islands could be said to be less represented on the Internet compared to Mauritius. The tourists to Mauritius bought more 'access' and auxiliary products and the tourists to Andaman Islands bought more accommodation and 'attractions'. The tourists to Andaman Islands were more price-sensitive, more internet-savvy and less worried about online privacy and security issues. In comparison, more tourists to Mauritius searched online and shopped offline and they liked the Internet for its convenience and efficiency. They were more worried about the privacy and security concerns, thought Internet was impersonal and wanted 'personal touch' and were less Internet savvy. The lesson for the SMTEs is to align their e-marketing strategies with the destination positioning.

CONCLUSION

This study was done to identify the information needs of the SMTE customers so that the SMTEs may meet these needs profitably through and at their websites. This study is exploratory in nature and provides only a general picture on the tourists' motivations, inhibitions and on-site behavior. With the availability of sophisticated web development tools, the SMTEs face the temptation of building websites that showcase technology. But a visitor may very well be saying, 'Don't show me how good your website is. Show me what I need'. Beauty indeed lies in the eyes of the beholder.

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