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Genderwise Perception of Online Tourism Services: A Study in Meerut

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Abstract

Most companies are looking for different ways of marketing in this era of intense competition and hence, internet has become very popular as an “anytime, anywhere” medium. Technology has made an impact on every industry and tourism is not an exemption. Several firms have offered their services online and they claim that their services are better than the traditional travel agencies but more important is the perception of their customers. This paper thus studies the perception of male and female tourists’ of the online tourism services hence available in the market.

Introduction

Tourism is flourishing as an industry. The economy of many tourist places depends upon tourism. In the present times, the tourism industry is a big source of income. In 1993, WTO suggested official and technical definition of tourism for statistical purpose and it states, “Tourism is the activity of person travelling to and staying in places outside the usual environment for not more than one consecutive year for leisure, business or any other purpose.” The growing number of tourism websites in developed and developing countries shows the increasing importance of electronic media in the tourism industry. Internet plays an important role as a new method in increasing the demand in tourism industry, which results in attracting more tourists and generating more income and also developing the tourism industry. A wide range of studies have been carried out on the importance of information and communication technology the tourism industry. Customers’ behavior in e-tourism, for example, has been the focus of these studies. This particular study emphasizes on customers’ perception of on-line tourism websites as an important factor in selecting their buying pattern.

The tourism sector consists of a series of relationships between a variety of suppliers, tourism products, destination marketing organizations, tour operators, and travel agents. The tourism industry consists of transportation, accommodation, food and beverage, recreation and entertainment, and travel services. Travel services are the processes used by guests to book different components of their trip.

A travel agency is a business that operates as the intermediary between the travel industry (supplier) and the traveler (purchaser). A travel agent is the direct point of contact for a traveller who is researching and intending to purchase packages and experiences through an agency. Online travel agents (OTAs) are companies that provide accommodations and transportation options and allow users to choose one or many components of their trip based on price or other incentives. OTAs can provide lower-cost travel options to travelers and the freedom to plan and reserve when they choose. They have posed challenges for the tourism industry and travel services infrastructure.

Many companies have adopted internet for conducting business transactions and sharing business information with their customers and business partners. The internet provides a marketplace where buyers and sellers conduct transactions directly, interactively and in real time beyond the physical limitations of traditional brick and mortar retailers which confine the consumers to a limited version of the stores and available products and services.

E-tourism is generated when traditional travel agents, tour operators, airlines, hotels and others provide their services online. This allows the tourists to plan their trip online and hence provides a new way of doing business for tourism service providers. Fast communication, worldwide accessibility and lesser costs are the immediate reasons of going online for tourism organizations. E-tourism benefits both tourists and tourism organizations. Tourists can easily search for anything they require, find useful information and can book their travel needs on-line. Also, the tourism firms can offer tourism services on-line that can be sold directly to the customers thus eliminating the high rates of commissions of intermediaries.

Tourism services, being intangible, cannot be physically displayed or inspected at the point of sale before the trip. Therefore, tourism products are highly dependent on the way they are represented and offered by the tourism firms. One of the important issues in the e-business is to provide an appropriate level of quality of tourism services which leads to tourists' satisfaction. Although various studies have been carried out to study the satisfaction of consumers of various services, this paper aims to find out what consumers perceive of the tourism services available online.

This paper is organized as follows. In section 2, the related literature has been reviewed and section 3 is devoted to the methodology of the research. Section 4 shows the characteristics of the respondents to the questionnaire along with the results of the research. Finally in section 5, a discussion on the obtained results concludes the paper.

Literature Review

Tourism and internet are two of the most important motivator of the evolving global economy. Today, due to the nature of tourism products and services, consumers are more interested

in gaining as much information as possible regarding tourism products and services to minimize their buying risk and increase their satisfaction. Travelers cannot pre-test the product ie travel or easily get a refund if the trip does not meet their expectations; hence access to reliable, accurate, timely and relevant information is crucial to help them make the right choice.

If a tourism service organization can represent its services better on the internet than others, then it may attract those tourists who are not sure of where to go. As the usage of e-tourism increases, it becomes important to understand what creates a satisfying customer experience. Despite this importance there have been less studies related to the satisfaction of online industries especially online tourism. There are several works related to satisfaction with traditional ways of tourism service providers but not for the online method.

Convenience is the most important factor of consumers' satisfaction with internet and is related to speed, easy access to information at low cost i.e. time and effort where everything can be found in a minute without time or geographical restraints.

Bender (1997), Sheldon (1997), Inkpen (1998), Richer and O'Neil-Dunne (1998), Buhalis and Schertler (1999), Marcussen (1999) and O'Connor (1999)- who have conducted several researches in the area of internet tourism marketing, provide some necessary insights in this regard. An organized presentation, interactivity tools available, a good reality simulation and products virtual experimentation possibility, attractive web pages presentation should contain animated gifts, video, sound and entertainment contents like advertisement. "Reliability" on internet information search elements is related to diversity, depth and actuality of information contents. "Entertainment" in internet concludes that entertainment is an important factor of consumer satisfaction with internet shopping, and is related with the pleasure of browsing, advertising and bonus offers in websites. "Security" perception and privacy "assurance" with internet shopping demonstrates to have the biggest impact of satisfaction. Researches prove that security is the major risk affecting online transactions, acting as the principal barrier to electronic commerce. Internet "product offer" is generally satisfactory for consumers concerning product diversity and available brands but doesn't show a major impact on satisfaction.

The authors state that personalized online tourism services play an important role for tourists. To deliver proper information, a match between the service provider and the user is needed. In the phase of trip planning, the user primarily needs preferences and interests, while during the trip location and time context are added.

Burke's work reported that on-line shoppers were most satisfied with the convenience, product quality, value provided and product selection offered by the online shopping experience. According to Szymanski and Hise (2000), the most important factors which provide e-tourism satisfaction have been summarized as convenience, site design, financial security and product information. Elliott and Boshoff say that although internet is a promising tool for tourism industry, it is challenging as many owners do not understand the drivers of ecommerce.

Studies conducted by Arpita Khare and Ayushman Khare explain that the rapid growth of the travel sector in India, and increased usage of technology as a tool for facilitating online transaction has led

to a blending of technology with travel planning. Manoj Dixit, Belwal and Singh explains the growth of online tourism in the world and its impact on economic conditions. Jayawardhena and Foley (2000) identify the convenience; site design and financial security are the dominant factors in customer assessment of e-satisfaction. The findings of D Janet Neal and Dogan Gursan indicate that tourists the level of satisfaction and dissatisfaction during various stages of travel affect their overall satisfaction with travel and tourism services. With the huge amount of information available on the internet and the increasing importance of online search, understanding the tourism domain is essential for effective online marketing.

Research Methodology

The questionnaire for the study was designed in different sections and the questionnaire was finalized after conducting a pilot test. The first section of the questionnaire is designed to obtain the respondents' demographic data: gender, age, education, occupation and income.

Section 2 consists of the main questions related to the research. In section 2, items presented are related to the different aspects of tourism services that can affect customer satisfaction. The items questions in this section investigate the perceptions of tourists toward on-line tourism organizations. In this section respondents are asked to mention their perception on a 5-point scale (1) Strongly Disagree, (2) Disagree, (3) Neutral, (4) Agree and (5) Strongly Agree.

Before data collection, in order to validate a pilot test was conducted and the questionnaire was given to 10 people from the sample to check if all questions are easy to understand and whether any changes were required. Some modifications were applied as required. The suitable population to collect data from for this study are those who have experienced e-tourism atleast once before.

A total of 250 questionnaires were distributed. After removing questionnaires with unfilled or not properly filled statements, the valid data collected was from 230 questionnaires.

Results

The demographic data of the respondents (Table 1) can be seen as follows:

Table 1: Demographic data of the respondents

	Variable	Percent
Gender	Male	75.2
	Female	24.3
Age	18-25	11.3
	25-35	28.3
	35-45	17.4
	45-55	15.7
	55 and above	27.4
Education	Diploma	2.2

	10+2	0.9
	Graduate	50
	Post Graduate	40.9
	Higher Degree	10
Occupation	Student	7.4
	Service	68.3
	Self employed	19.6
	Not employed	2.6
	Housewife	3.5
Income (Rs Per Month)	Below 10000	9.6
	10000-30000	20
	30000-50000	27
	50000-70000	48
	70000 and above	53

The factors studied were trust, convenience, best deals and price, site design and technological advancement and financial security.

The number of male respondents was more as females were found to be dependent on their families and spouses for internet bookings. Male respondents were found to be better informed and having a greater feeling of trust and security with respect to online tourism.

The respondents with better educational backgrounds were found to be comfortable in website navigation and comparing deals available on different websites. Financial security was found not to be an issue with the male respondents but booking for international flights evoked a mix of responses from both male and female respondents. Although, convenience was the main reason for using online tourism services for both male and female respondents.

Conclusion

Obtained results showed that site design and convenience have the highest influence on e-satisfaction in the tourism industry. Being tied together, these two factors constitute the most important determinants of tourism e-satisfaction. Convenience factor includes the increase in the time efficiency and the possibility for customers to shop anytime and from anywhere which are important issues for tourists. Moreover Site design factor implies that a good website offering e-tourism services should be fast, friendly and uncluttered.

For future study different sectors of tourism industry can be considered, hence it would be useful to re-examine this research in different sections of the tourism industry separately (e.g. airlines, tickets, booking, hotel reservation systems).

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