

Theoretical Framework for Quality Evaluation of Tourism-Related Websites Services

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Recent developments in the realm of information technology (IT) have brought the Internet to the attention of marketers, who have quickly acknowledged this new, powerful marketing medium and gradually realised its strategic importance. The unique capability of the Web to blend text, pictures, sounds and video clips into multimedia documents has pre-determined the extensive use of the Internet beyond its traditional academic boundaries and made it a popular marketing medium globally.

The area of e-SQ in tourism appears to have been understudied, and there is clearly a need for further research. With growing role of websites as a customer contact point and virtual company office, tourism businesses are realising the strategic importance of a website as a tool for addressing consumers in electronic business environment.

Keywords: *Internet marketing, electronic service quality (e-SQ), tourism, website, online consumer behaviour, online customer needs.*

1 Introductory aspects regarding tourist satisfaction

Tourists, like other customers, usually have initial expectations of the type and quality of services to be offered in a particular destination. These expectations are formed mainly through information provided via tourism advertisements, commercials, brochures, mass media and informal information from friends and relatives. The extent to which tourist expectations are met will eventually determine the level of tourist satisfaction. If the overall performance, while or after visiting a destination, exceeds or meets initial expectation then the tourist is considered satisfied. However, if perceived performance falls below initial expectation then the tourist may be dissatisfied. Customer satisfaction is increasingly becoming a salient issue in most service industries.

With reference to the tourism and hospitality industry, it can be stated that satisfied tourists are more likely to recommend the tourist destination to others, which is the cheapest and most effective form of marketing and promotion. Furthermore, tourist satisfaction usually contributes to increased rates of the retention of tourists' patronage, loyalty and acquisition, which in turn helps in realizing economic goals like increased number of tourists and

revenues. As a consequence, there is usually a positive association between tourist satisfaction and the destination's long term economic success. However, in many literatures service qualities mentioned as a main factor, it should be stated that overall tourist satisfaction is affected not only by the quality of what the tourist receives, but also by price and perceived value of the product and/or service. These results from an evaluation of the rewards and sacrifices associated with the purchase of the tourism product.

The evaluation of tourist satisfaction needs to be considered in multiple dimensions. Tourists may have varying motivations for visiting particular destinations, and also may have different satisfaction levels and standards. Therefore, a model that integrates the approaches used by previous models may be most effective in assessing tourist satisfaction.

Consequently, destination managers should establish a higher tourist satisfaction level to create positive post-purchase tourist behaviour, in order to improve and sustain destination competitiveness.

In tourism, as in other service industries, the emergence, survival, development, and failure of ventures depend heavily upon customer satisfaction. Peters and Waterman

(1984) in their bestseller *In Search of Excellence* found that firms that valued their customers above all else out-performed those that did not.

Moreover, bearing in mind that tourism is an experience made up of many different interdependent parts, some more tangible than others, customer satisfaction may be treated as a cumulative measure of total purchase and consumption experience over time.

2. Electronic service quality. Definition, similarities and differences with traditional service quality

Whereas aspects of traditional service quality (dimensions, related variables etc.) have been studied extensively over the past two decades, the study of the service quality of websites is a fledgling domain. Zeithaml and al., (2002) defined electronic service quality as "the extent to which a web site facilitates efficient and effective shopping, purchasing, and delivery of products and services". This transactional quality entails the evaluation of the pre - and post -service experience. Based on this definition, we can draw a parallel with traditional service quality to elucidate the similarities and differences between these two concepts.

The most important and probably the most evident difference between traditional service quality and electronic service quality is the replacement of interpersonal interaction with human-machine interaction. This simple distinction raises many questions concerning the type of dimensions that can or must be considered to assess service quality in the e-commerce context. Owing to the specific characteristics of online commerce, direct application of the dimensions of service quality developed in other environments is not appropriate, or at best, does not capture all of the subtleties of the evaluation of service quality of commercial websites. The classic dimensions of traditional service quality are tangible elements, reliability, reactivity, assurance and empathy of the service provider. To date, however, there is no consensus concerning the dimensions of electronic service quality. Although largely anecdotal, dimen-

sions proposed recur fairly systematically: security/confidentiality, website design, efficacy, ease of use and the quality of the information contained in the site. If classic evaluations of traditional service quality are based on the calculation of a gap between expectations and perceptions, it is difficult to apply this same model to the measurement of electronic service quality.

Main Website E-SQ Assessment Techniques

The majority of scales measuring website e-SQ have been developed in the specific industrial service contexts. Many of the existing scales have been developed in the e-retailing context. There are also attempts to evaluate e-SQ of websites in an online tourism service context. It is seen that there is a need for developing different e-SQ measurement scales for different types of websites and services offered. In the following sections, we review three main scales developed for measuring website e-SQ, namely e-SERVQUAL, WEBQUAL, and eTailQ, which appear to be the most comprehensive ones amongst those reported in the literature to date.

E-SERVQUAL

E-SERVQUAL measures website e-SQ as perceived by customers. It is a method for measuring website e-SQ that is based on the same principle as the original SERVQUAL method and includes some dimensions similar to those of SERVQUAL. The E-SERVQUAL scale contains a core and recovery scale, represented by four and three dimensions respectively. Core scale is used to measure the customers' perceptions of service quality delivered by online retailers. Recovery scale refers to specific situations, when a customer has a question or runs into a problem, in which the three dimensions of the recovery scale become silent. In simpler terms, it can be said that core scale refers to the quality of the website itself, while the recovery scale is more concerned with the actual performance of the company, rather than with website performance.

Four dimensions of core e-SERVQUAL scale are efficiency, fulfilment, reliability and pri-

vacy. *Efficiency* defines customers' ability to effectively access the website, find their desired product and related information, and check it out with minimal effort. *Fulfilment* refers to a company's actual performance in contrast with what is promised through the website, and incorporates accuracy of service promises, such as having products in stock and timely delivery. *Reliability* is a technical function of the website such as the extent to which it is available and functioning properly. Finally, *privacy* refers to the company's will and ability to maintain the integrity of customer data.

Three recovery dimensions of e-SERVQUAL are responsiveness, compensation and contact points, which are mainly concerned with the situations which arise when a problem needs to be solved and "personal service" is required. *Responsiveness* defines the company's ability to provide appropriate problem-solving mechanisms (online complaint handling, handling returns mechanisms, online guarantees, etc.). *Compensation* involves money-back guarantees, return of shipping and handling costs. *Contact points* refers to customers' need to speak to a "live" customer service agent online or on the phone, and defines the company's ability to offer such support in real-time via online or other means of communication.

WEBQUAL

WEBQUAL focuses on the website interface and is suggested to be one the most empirically grounded e-SQ scales. WEBQUAL is developed based on the conceptual background of the Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA) and the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM). The main idea behind the use of WEBQUAL is that it is possible to predict the re-visit/re-use behaviour of web users based on their perceptions of overall website quality. The instrument consists of four constructs, namely *usefulness*, *ease of use*, *entertainment*, and *complimentary relationship*, which include a range of website dimensions, each of which is evaluated by a website visitor according to his/her perceptions of website quality.

Usefulness includes informational fit-to-task, interactivity, trust and response time dimensions. *Informational fit-to-task* refers to the quality of the information offered on the website, its appropriateness and the method of presentation. *Interactivity* is the website's ability to allow different flows of communication between the site's users and the company's personnel, interactive search for information, and transactions through the website. The *trust* dimension refers to maintaining the privacy of customer information provided through the website. *Response time* is the website's technical characteristics in relation to loading time in a user's browser and the time required to complete transactions with the website. Ease of use includes ease of understanding and intuitive operations dimensions. *Ease of understanding* refers to the quality of website structure and user interface, such as Web layout, site hierarchy of pages, etc. *Intuitive operations* refers to the ability to learn how to operate the website quickly and without great effort. Furthermore, the entertainment construct consists of the *visual appeal* (presentation graphics and text), *innovativeness* ("aha"/surprise element associated with creativity and uniqueness), and *flow-emotional appeal* (the website's ability to deliver enjoyable and engrossing experiences for users) dimensions. Finally, complimentary relationship construct includes *consistent image* (the website's ability to accurately reflect the company's image promoted through other communication channels), *on-line completeness* (the website's overall ability to suit customers in their operations), and *better than alternative channels* (the website's ability to act on the same level or better than alternative marketing channels) dimensions.

Overall, it can be said that with WEBQUAL a website is judged for its ability to satisfy customer needs. One important limitation of the WEBQUAL-instrument is that its development was based on the responses of undergraduate students, who evaluated several selected e-retailing websites. Another important limitation is that respondents also were not on-going customers of the websites

they were evaluating. Therefore, further confirmatory research is needed with broad samples of "real" customers of websites.

eTailQ

eTailQ is the scale for measuring and predicting e-tail quality. The scale was developed in a three-stage study approach: focus group discussions with online buyers (first stage of research); conceptualisation and categorisation of emerged items (e-tail quality dimensions) from the customer's perspective (second stage of research); and an online survey to determine the scale dimensions (factors) (third stage of research). The results suggest that four website quality dimensions (or factors) can predict customer judgements of quality and satisfaction with the website, namely website design, fulfilment/reliability, privacy/security, and customer service. Here, fulfilment/reliability refers to (a) the accurate display and description of a product (what you get is what you buy) and (b) delivery of the right product within the time frame promised. Website design refers to all elements of the consumer's experience at the website (except for customer service), including navigation, information search, order processing, appropriate personalisation and product selection. Customer service refers to a responsive, helpful, willing service that responds to customer enquiries quickly. Finally, security/privacy refers to the security of credit card payments on the website and privacy of

shared information (Ibid.). The scale was subjected to several validity and reliability tests, the results of which suggest that the scale performs well. The design logic behind the original eTailQ scale strongly resembles the WEBQUAL scale, offering to test website quality based on the judgements of website users concerning the website's performance. Overall, website users are asked to state how well the website performs, in their opinion, along with 40 statements that can be grouped within the four named factors.

E-SQ Profile of Tourism Websites

Modern hospitality organisations need to have an in-depth knowledge of customer needs, behaviour and preferences and be aware of the ways in which the services delivered create value for the customers and stimulate their retention and loyalty. Tourism websites can benefit from offering e-services, which add value to online consumer shopping operations throughout the online shopping process. These e-services are information, communication, transaction and safety/security and e-services related to user interface, technology and navigation.

The following e-services (see Table 1) can add value to tourism consumers' online shopping operations as perceived by the consumers, and, therefore, can comprise an e-SQ profile of a tourism website.

Table 1. Website e-services that are particularly important for tourism website users

	Tourism E-Services	Description
1.	Company info	Detailed information related to the company and its activity
2.	Product info	Ability to gather in-depth information about tourism products/services
3.	Chat/customer forum/guestbook	Opportunity to communicate with other customers via the website and learn about previous customer experiences
4.	Tourism info	Ability to obtain other relevant tourism information on the website
5.	Direct links	Direct links to other websites providing the relevant tourism information
6.	Online order tracking	A website feature that allows customers to monitor their order's status
7.	Product personalisation	Ability to tailor tourism product/service to the customer's specific needs
8.	Website interaction	Ability to interact with the company through the website

9.	Online reservation & payment	Ability to book the product/service and choose to pay for it directly on the website
10.	Website map	Hierarchical diagram of the pages on the website
11.	Location features	Website's ability to show customer's current location within the website
12.	Local search engine	Search engine located on the website that enables visitors to search on keywords in order to quickly locate specific information and pages on the website
13.	User-friendly interface	Visually pleasing and entertaining appearance of the website, its graphical interface (choice of layout, fonts, colours, etc.)
14.	Personal info storage	Opportunity for customers to store personal information and history of their previous transactions with the company
15.	Website customisation	Ability to filter the website content according to customers' preferences and interests
16.	Mailing list subscription	Subscription to the company's mailing list to receive personalised information about offers, campaigns, news, etc.
17.	Browser efficiency/friendliness	Ability to open and operate the website without any problems in browsers, other than Internet Explorer, for example, in Opera, Mozilla, or Safari
18.	Safety & security information	Information related to safety and security on the website
19.	Multimedia	Multimedia features
20.	Customised product search	Ability to search for a product/service based on the pre-selected criteria

Understanding how tourism consumers behave is critically important to tourism marketers; without this understanding it is impossible to design an appropriate marketing response to consumers' needs. Tourism consumers' uses of the Web can be summarised into three groups of activities: information search, online communication, and online shopping

Information search: It is suggested that the information quality of tourism-related websites is vital to potential online buyers. Information availability and access is associated with a reduction of perceived buyer risks and uncertainty avoidance.

Travel websites offering good information features have a better chance of promoting web users' interest in products and assisting them in their buying choices. Important types of information to offer include company-related information (physical address, clear description of activities, clear contact information and alternative channels of contact, etc.), products and services-related informa-

tion (seasonal availability, product/service presentation with text, pictures or multimedia, and other relevant information), information on prices (high/low-season prices, special deals and discounts, gift cards and cooperation agreements, group-price information, etc.).

The Web's informational capability determines its popularity amongst consumers as a rich source of information and a cost- and time-effective alternative to traditional sources, such as brochures, magazines, catalogues, etc. The Web also offers additional services for price comparisons, search engines on pre-determined criteria and expert opinions in related chat-rooms and forums.

Online communication:

A tourism website should offer communication features, allowing interaction between the service provider and customers in a buying context. Here, features such as travel advice, confirmation of reservations and orders, deposits and full settlement are important. Communication e-services, such as the abil-

ity to complain, e-mail, and website-based customer support, allowing interactive dialogue between the tourism service provider and customers, are important for reducing customers' perception of risk, problem solving and the shopping process. Online community communication features, such as chat forums, message boards and online subscription services offered on the tourism website, allow customers to gather information about the providers, the destination and related tourism products from fellow consumers, and are important risk and uncertainty reducing activities

Many authors conclude that the crucial features of tourism-related website success are multilingual content and interactive site features.

A virtual community is a powerful tool for enhancing customer relationships and building loyalty, from which the tourism industry in particular can benefit. A virtual community is a "virtual space" that draws people together according to their interests, and allows them to share information and aggregate resources. Here, potential travellers can obtain information about trips through travel guides, newsletters, online brochures and similar sources.

Online shopping: E-commerce/e-transaction features such as product customization, online reservation and payment features add flexibility and effectiveness to tourism consumers' shopping processes. The majority of studies on tourism consumers' online needs have reported that online reservation and payment features are the most preferred and important features of the websites of hotels, attraction-providers, and public and private transport companies.

Online reservations/booking is highlighted as a particularly important value-adding feature for tourists. The reason is that reserving and booking a trip is the prime role of a physical travel agency. This role is now fulfilled to an increasing degree by tourism websites

Safety of Internet payments is the major concern of tourists who choose to pay for their ticket, hotel room or trip directly on the website. Website quality features that improve

the customer's website safety and security should be of concern to a tourism company, offering an online payment facility. Recent developments, such as cryptographic systems for online payments and Internet-payment cards, offer solutions to these problems.

Multimedia is also an important information-related feature associated with uncertainty avoidance, and, therefore, can be recommended as an advisable feature to have on travel-related websites.

The user interface of a tourism-related website should be entertaining and attractive, as this is in the nature of the industry. Web design should be simple, but captivating. Multimedia is an important feature to use in tourism, because it can give a potential tourist a travel "preview," a grasp of the tourist destination or the attraction. A tourism website should not be overloaded with complex functions and information. An important quality characteristic is fast downloading times and browser friendliness, i.e. a website should be accessible and functional when opened in different browsers.

However, an important concern with multimedia features is that they should not affect website downloading times and be browser-friendly, otherwise they will work against and decrease the quality of the website

Tourism website users also reported that it is important for them to see the location of the hotel room, access information about the view from the window, etc.

Some studies report that a range of e-services related to various travel needs, such as currency converters, weather forecast reports, local transport schedules and fares, local attractions and events information, or links to related websites offering relevant travel information might be of importance to tourism consumers

3. Conclusion

E-SQ is a new developing area, which has strategic importance for businesses striving to address consumers in the electronic marketplace. It is suggested that consumer behaviour in an online environment may differ from the one displayed in the physical world.

Therefore, it is important for practitioners to understand the customer needs amenable to fulfilment in an online environment and strive to meet them.

In summary, the important e-SQ attributes of tourism-related websites in terms of how well websites can satisfy customer needs and facilitate the online shopping process are information wealth of the websites, their communication and interactivity features, quality of user interface, reservation/payment features and safety/security features allowing safe e-transactions via the websites.

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