



Customer satisfaction with the Bulgarian tour operators and tour agencies' websites[☆]

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ABSTRACT

The goal of this study is to analyse the e-tourism development in Bulgaria, and particularly customer satisfaction with the quality of the tourism companies' websites. A total of 249 firms' websites have been evaluated by tourism master students according to selected indicators. The conceptual model contained 10 indicators as antecedents for customer satisfaction. The results of the multiple linear regression analysis confirmed the positive influence of the website quality on customer satisfaction in terms of playfulness, navigation, trust, variety of destinations abroad, online transactions, and information quality. Four website dimensions (responsiveness, personalization, diversity of tourism products and services, and variety of destinations inside the country) were not supported, which can be explained by the stage of the tourism companies' e-development and the specific segment of customers. The findings suggest that the firms are underperforming in terms of providing web quality dimensions that enhance the young and well educated customers' satisfaction.

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1. Introduction

During recent years the ICT related tourism innovations have led to dramatic changes in the tourism sector. The tourism supply chain became more complex due to new online intermediaries (Buhalis & Licata, 2002, p. 218; Kracht & Wang, 2010, p. 743). Consumer behaviour also changed as the internet became one of the most influential information sources for travel: "A new type of user is emerging, one who acts as his or her own travel agent and builds a personalised travel package" (Werthner & Ricci, 2004, p. 101). The web environment has empowered consumers on three levels: (1) to make informed purchases; (2) to "join forces" with other customers and exchange opinions; and (3) to communicate with tourism companies interactively in order to receive tailor-made products (Niininen, Buhalis, & March, 2007, p. 266). The Internet was also transformed into an important channel for online transactions – 10% of EU travellers in 2008 bought their holiday travels from *online tour agencies* (EC, 2009, p. 39–40). Similarly, 63% of leisure travellers and 65% of

business travellers in the USA have used the internet to find price information on travel and hotels (Lee & Morrison, 2010, p. 50).

For the 2002–2008 periods the growth of the tourism market was due mainly to its online component (EyeforTravel Ltd., 2009). In comparison with its main competitors, Bulgaria had the lowest rate of growth for the 2004–2009 period (33.2% compared to 72.3% for Turkey and 52.6% for Greece). At the same time the major tourism markets for Bulgaria (Germany, UK, Russia, and France) showed an increased volume of online sales (Euromonitor International, 2010). The competitiveness of tourism firms became strongly dependent not only on their inclusion in the online tourism market, but also on the speed of applying the new ICT and e-business innovations (Blake, Sinclair, & Campos Soria, 2006). The ICT adoption, however, requires re-engineering of the entire processes, which is particularly difficult in small and medium size enterprises (SMEs) (Buhalis & Law, 2008, p. 619).

Although tourism contributes some 10% to the country's GDP, until now there has been limited research on the e-tourism development in Bulgaria (Ivanova, 2009; Kraeva, Emilova, Marinova, & Lalev, 2010; Kraeva, Gorcheva, & Bozhikov, 2009), which did not allow for regional or international comparisons. At the same time the number of country internet users has grown constantly (46.4% of the population in 2011 regularly used the internet, compared to 13.5% in 2004), particularly among those aged 16–24 years (80%) and students (94.2%). As in some other touristic countries with low e-commerce development, however, the share of online shoppers (6.7% of the population in 2011) remained relatively small. Nevertheless, online travel and hotel reservations are in second place (30.4%) after clothing and sportswear (52.2%) among commodities purchased online (National Statistical Institute, 2012). This situation requires more attention to

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be given to the inclusion of Bulgarian tour agencies and tour operators in the e-tourism market.

The paper is *structured* as follows. Next follows the e-tourism state of the art, after which the research methodology is presented, the main results and discussion, and the conclusions.

2. Literature review

The rapid development of e-tourism has been accompanied by an increasing number of publications on its different aspects (Cooper & Burgess, 2000; Standing & Vasudavan, 2000; Doolin, Burgess, & Cooper, 2002; Marcussen, 2003, 2005; Lawson, Alcock, Cooper, & Burgess, 2003; Buhalis & Deimezi, 2004; Cheyne, Downes, & Legg, 2006; Werthner, 2006; Ho & Lee, 2007; Park & Gretzel, 2007; Hall & Williams, 2008; Law & Bai, 2008; Schaupp, Bélanger, & Fan, 2009; Salwani, Marthandan, Norzaidi, & Chong, 2009; Law, Qi, & Buhalis, 2010, etc.). All these researchers revealed that the adoption of e-business had become *crucial* for the survival of tourism companies in the *new economy*. On the operational level, e-tourism assumes the inclusion of e-commerce and the maximum use of ICT to improve the internal efficiency of tourism organisations. At the strategic level, e-tourism requires full integration of internal and external company's processes (Buhalis, 2003).

One of the most widely used research methods in the evaluation of the e-maturity of tourism companies is the analysis of their websites (Ho & Lee, 2007, p. 1434). This method was applied to: (1) evaluate the development stage of the e-business adoption; (2) assess customer satisfaction with online services; (3) identify success factors for this adoption; and (4) cost-benefit analysis (Lu, Lu, & Zhang, 2002, p. 193).

2.1. Stages of e-business development

The *stages* of e-business development were identified according to various theoretically developed models. Willcocks, Sauer, and Associates (2000) proposed a 4-stage model, where firms start with a web presence, create infrastructure and skills for e-commerce, and end by transforming the organisation into being more customer focused (Willcocks et al., 2000). The Model of Internet Commerce Adoption (MICA) included three stages of e-business development – web-based promotion, provision of information and services, and transaction processing (Cooper & Burgess, 2000). The usefulness of this model (often slightly modified) was demonstrated by many researchers (Lawson et al., 2003, p. 267; Doolin et al., 2002, p. 558; Peng, Trappey, & Liu, 2005, p. 478). Some authors suggested, however, that there is little evidence that small tourism firms follow a “stages of growth” model for internet and e-commerce adoption. They considered the owners' recognition of the e-business value and their attitude to business growth to be key factors in this adoption (Levy & Powell, 2003, p. 507). Morrison and King (2002) also showed that conventional business models were inadequate given the hesitancy of many small owner operators towards e-business adoption (Morrison & King, 2002, p. 107).

2.2. Website evaluation approaches

Previous researches that assessed the performance of travel websites can be classified as being either *with or without users' involvement* (Law & Cheung, 2005). Based on the review of tourism studies from 1996 to July 2009, Law et al. (2010) differentiated five approaches: counting, automated, numerical computation, user judgement, and combined methods (Law et al., 2010, pp. 297, 300). Most often researchers used combinations of these methods, because no single method seems to outperform others (Law & Bai, 2006). Based on 83 articles from 23 journals, Chiou, Lin, and Perng (2010) found that *different website evaluation approaches* have been

introduced. Their data showed that, before 2001, “59% of studies adopted the information systems-approach, 14% adopted the marketing approach, while the remaining studies (27%) adopted the combined-approach... However, after the burst..., the combined-approach increased to 55%” (Chiou et al., 2010, p. 284). Research on users' judgement methods chose consumers, including potential consumers, as evaluators of different aspects of tourism organisation websites. User involvement was particularly important when measuring consumer satisfaction with website attributes (Stockdale & Borovicka, 2007).

2.3. Evaluation of website dimensions

In their summary of previous research on the e-service quality, Ho and Lee (2007) found that its main dimensions differed significantly (Ho & Lee, 2007, p. 1436). Perdue (2001) developed a conceptual model for website evaluation as a function of site navigation, visual attractiveness, and information content. Lu et al. (2002) used a model with seven functions: general tourism service information publicity; advertising tourism product/service; advertising with price information; email enquiry; online booking; on-line payment; and tourism website registration with user ID. Their study did not distinguish websites and e-commerce websites, as the methods for website evaluation can also be applied to e-commerce websites. Kim and Lee (2004) explored six dimensions of web service quality: ease of use, usefulness, information content, security, responsiveness, and personalisation. Hashim, Murphy, and Law (2007) revealed five dimensions of website quality: information and process, value added, relationships, trust, design and usability. Park and Gretzel (2007) identified nine website success factors: information quality; ease of use; responsiveness; security/privacy; visual appearance; trust; interactivity; personalization; fulfilment, and three factors related to the web communication (advertising/persuasion, playfulness, and technology integration).

In evaluating different websites, two major constructs emerged – *functionality and usability*. Functionality refers to the contents of the website (information richness), while usability relates to the website design (degree of ease). Au Yeung and Law (2006) developed five dimensions for usability of travel and hotel websites (language, layout and graphics, information architecture, user interface and navigation). Law and Bai (2008) identified also five dimensions for the functionality attributes of hotel websites: facilities information, customer information, reservation information, surrounding area information, and management of website (Law & Bai, 2008, pp. 394, 395). Thus, the web design in terms of both functionality and usability came to be of critical importance (Buhalis & Law, 2008, p. 616).

2.4. Assessment of customer satisfaction

Website analysis has been applied to assess *customer satisfaction* with the website quality (Rehesaar, 2001; Shim, Eastlick, Lotz, & Warrington, 2001), as well as customer purchase and re-purchase intentions. These intentions depend strongly on the level of satisfaction and trust towards the website (Lee, 2002). Law and Bai (2008) found that website quality has a direct and positive impact on customer satisfaction, and that customer satisfaction has a direct and positive impact on purchase intentions, mediating the effect of website quality (Law & Bai, 2008, p. 388). Anderson and Srinivasan (2003) defined e-satisfaction as “the contentment of the customer with respect to his or her prior purchasing experience with a given electronic commerce firm” (Anderson & Srinivasan, 2003, p. 125).

Many studies confirmed that online service quality positively influenced customer satisfaction, which in turn enhanced purchase intentions (Kim & Stoel, 2004; Yen, Hu, & Wang, 2007; Zeithaml,

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