Performance evaluation of tourism websites' information quality of four global destination brands: Beijing, Hong Kong, Shanghai, and Taipei

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ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

Some tourists only have a slight idea of where they want to go on a holiday when planning starts. Such tourists or their travel partners are likely to look for information for making a final travel decision. As the web becomes an increasingly popular information source, tourism destination websites can play a critical role in destination choice. A rubric for comparing tourism websites put forward by Dion and Woodside (2010) is used and ideas for enhancing the rubric are introduced utilizing a growing literature. Comparisons are made for the tourism websites of Hong Kong, Shanghai, Beijing, and Taipei. Analysis involves considering websites' quality and usefulness. The study indicates that Hong Kong's site is best while Beijing has the most room for improvement. The paper concludes with implications of the research for website analysis. The discussion includes contributions to the value of criteria for websites found in the literature but not covered in an information-quality performance rubric.

1. Introduction

Internet tourism research has a variety of thrusts involving both theory and practice (e.g., see Cho and Fesenmaier, 2001; Zins, 2007). Supporting indirect experience of tourism products is an important issue. Simulation of real visits can lead to a strong feeling of destination image (Cho, Wang, & Fesenmaier, 2002). Therefore, the worldwide web (WWW) is playing an increasing role in destination marketing since offline information does not allow the flexible interaction the Web allows (Buhalis & Law, 2008).

Recognizing the potential role of the WWW in influencing decisions about visiting destinations, Dion and Woodside (2010) propose a rubric for assessing destinations' websites. They apply the rubric with special consideration of countries and regulations involving tourism. The rubric involves enumerating attributes of websites to see how destinations compare. Additional researchers apply the Dion and Woodside (2010) rubric to evaluate tourism websites for cities (Woolsey, 2011), states in the USA as destinations (Knoerr & Megehee, 2011), and Mediterranean destinations (Fryc, 2010). However, the study here is the first to apply the methodology to global destination brands in nearby competitive proximities in Asia.

2. Literature

The Dion and Woodside (2010) rubric for assessing tourism website effectiveness addresses the need for a method to compare websites if one is to consider information quality in destination tourism websites. Their study compares four visa and non-visa tourist destination websites at the national level using a rubric with 36 attributes. Their examination includes government-run and Lonely Planet's websites for four countries: China, Poland, Russia, and Thailand. One proposition tested is that countries that require visas lack quality and quantity in internet marketing compared to countries that do not require a visa.

A second proposition is that the government run websites are comprehensive in detailing information in comparison to privately created websites. A final proposition tested addresses the quality of the government run websites relating to web presence and extensiveness of a countries' tourist destination literature. Research findings are taken to show the value of the rubric for website comparison, to demonstrate and highlight the deficiencies of websites given the fast pace growth of internet tourism marketing.

Dion and Woodside (2010) conclude that China is consistently the best represented country in both the government and Lonely Planet web media they consider. They conclude the Chinese government DMO website has the most languages available (10) and the best safety and security information. China has the largest web presence out of the four countries they study. In 2010 China replaced Spain as the world's third most visited country, behind France and the United States (World Tourism Organization, UN, 2011). However, China's

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touristic growth rate is considerably higher than other countries', so it is expected to reach the top one by 2020. Due to this fact, as well as Dion and Woodside's (2010) findings, this research focuses on Chinese cities.

Tarlow (2003) asserts, "Destinations must become less dependent on brochures for marketing," and instead should focus on advanced technology. Kim (2004) asserts that an increasing percent of web users are buying on-line implying that a larger and larger share of the tourism market will be online commerce. The idea is that the Internet offers the potential to make purchasing available to large numbers at a relatively low cost (Kim, 2004).

As Dion and Woodside (2010) imply the worldwide web provides better information access on tourism services than current alternatives and is convenient if websites are appropriately organized. However, the reason for comparison of websites is that not all websites are created equally well. Kim and Fesenmaier (2008) state that users make quick judgments on tourism Web sites and that inspiration and usability are the primary drivers evoking a favorable first impression. The assertion is that assessment can occur in a matter of seconds implying that the home page of a website is crucial to the success of the website. This means the home page must be attractive, offer needed information and be appealing. Part of being appealing is inviting use of a website for decision making.

A matter to consider in website assessment is that many national cultures are moving toward a virtual society (Mlot, 2010). Fong (1998) discusses conceptualizing consumer experiences in cyberspace. One can experience hotels and some destinations virtually (reference). Schlosser (2003) deals with of goals and imagery influencing attitudes versus purchase intentions in the virtual world. Regardless, Song, Fiore, and Park (2007) in the area of apparel and Hopkins Christopher, Anne, and Anu (2002) suggest that tele-presence mediates online information into cognitive responses, but also directly into some form of behavior. Bojnec and Kribel (2004) analyze the affect that Internet, mobile technology, and wireless computing have on tourists. Given web access, website design influences mobile device users gaining immediate access to a great variety about destinations. They recognize that potential tourists are searching for information such as prices, maps, driving directions, places to stay, activities to do, transportation, and entertainment (cf. Hyun & O'Keefe, 2012). Enabling such searches to be useful and succeed in providing desirable information is behind the issues appearing in the Dion and Woodside (2010) rubric.

3. China, tourism marketing and web information quality

Even if China is the third largest country by area, most tourists concentrate in few destinations. Hong Kong (Special Administrative Region), Shanghai (Financial Center), Beijing (Capital) and Taipei (non-communist government) are some of the most important destination brands in the same regional area. They rank 10th (7.01 million tourists), 18th (4.32 million), 27th (3.33 million) and 35th (2.81 million), respectively (Euromonitor International, 2011).

When potential tourists decide that they are going to visit China, they probably look for information in order to decide which city or cities are the most worth visiting. They may visit one or two, but they are not likely to visit all of them; so, these four cities compete against each other for tourists. This report analyzes the official tourism websites of each city and evaluates the usefulness and practicality of each one: Hong Kong: www.discoverhongkong.com, n.a.; Shanghai: www.meet-in-shanghai.net, n.a.; Beijing: english.visitbeijing.com.cn, n.a.; and Taipei: www.taipeitravel.net/en, n.a.

4. Hotel information and booking

Hong Kong's website allows visitors to search for accommodations based on location and hotel facilities. A hotel list is generated and when a hotel is chosen visitors can read the basic information of the hotel: address, telephone and website link. In some cases a description of the facilities is also available, but not in general, and also a reference rate. This rate, however, it is just an estimate, since rates will vary depending on dates. The main drawback is that hotels cannot be sorted by price or stars, so visitors have to look one by one if they can afford them. Moreover, the list includes all hotels, no matter whether there are available rooms in the desired dates or not; so, once again, visitors need to find it out themselves. Finally, in most cases online reservation is not available and visitors have to enter hotels' websites.

Taipei's website allows visitors to search accommodations by many different criterions: region, hotel stars, nearby tourist attractions, minimum and maximum rates… When choosing a hotel, visitors get detailed information such as address, contact information, pictures, a map, reference rates and facilities. However, it is not possible to book online, so visitors have to do it in the hotels' websites, if there's availability.

Shanghai's website allows visitors to search for accommodations only by number of stars. Once they choose the desired number of stars a list of hotels is generated, with hotel name, telephone and address. All hotels of that category are shown, no matter the availability. When choosing a hotel the link brings the visitor to a detailed description of the hotel including location, website, facilities and rooms. However, it does not provide a reference rate. Online booking is not available and visitors have to do it directly through hotel websites.

Beijing's website has, in theory, the best hotel information and booking system. Visitors can choose the arrival and departure dates, hotel stars and price range, and a list of hotels that match the selections is shown. In theory, the website has plenty information on each hotel and visitors can book from the website in each and every hotel. However, from 02/23/2012 to 02/28/2012 the website is showing an error message, so visitors are not allowed to book online.

5. Events calendar

Hong Kong's website provides an "Event Calendar," a calendar with the most important events in the city. There are about eight events per day and when clicking on one of them more information is shown (description, location, price, event website…). In some cases visitors can buy tickets online.

Shanghai's website has a "Calendar of Events" page, which classifies the events in four categories: Conventions, Exhibitions, Sports Events and Cultural/Tourism Events. Apart from the date, name, location and sometimes website link, there is no more information, not even a little description, so visitors may not know what the events are about. Online booking is not available.

Taipei's website has an "Events" page, but the events are shown by month, not by day. However, there are not many events per month. When clicking on one of them more information about description, location and transportation is shown. Online booking is not available. Beijing's website does not have an events calendar.

6. Maps, tourist attractions and transportation

Hong Kong's website has a digital map where most popular tourist locations are shown, divided in Attractions, Shopping Districts, Dining Districts, Hotels and Event Venues. In addition, there is a search engine where visitors can type anything they are interested in and the map will show the results. As for attractions, the "Attractions" section shows the most popular ones. If visitors click on one of them, the site offers high detailed information, pictures, audio guides and directions to get there. Apart from that, visitors have access to tram, train, taxi, bus and rail information.

Shanghai's website has a map showing the most popular attractions. However, visitors cannot get information about these attractions. For that, they have to go to "Highlights >> Attractions". Here attractions