

A Factor Analytic Study on Service Quality Perceptions and Satisfaction in the E- Tourism

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ABSTRACT: E-tourism has evolved as a mainstay business for tourist service providers. It plays an integral role in the dissemination of information and influencing consumer's preferences and satisfaction. The purpose of this study is to identify the dimensions of service quality perceptions of consumers in e-tourism in the Indian context. It also aims to understand the relative impact of these service quality dimensions on the satisfaction of the consumers. The techniques of factor and regression analysis have been used for this study. The findings show that consumers place a lot of emphasis on information content, security, functionality, customer interactions, and responsiveness while assessing the service quality and these in turn, affect their satisfaction level in the Indian e-tourism.

Keywords: *E-tourism, Service quality perceptions and satisfaction*

INTRODUCTION

Tourism and Internet are intricately related in today's world. Information technology (IT) has revolutionized the operations and marketing strategies in the e-business. The same is true for the evolving tourism industry in India. IT has become particularly important for enhancing internal coordination, e-marketing activities and online sales of varied tourism services for the consumers. New forms of tourism are emerging replacing traditional forms of tourism, and thereby promising customers with innovative, customized and experience-oriented services. In fact, e-tourism has now come to the forefront due to surge in the tourist activities world over. Tourism is stated to be the third largest net earner of foreign exchange for our country and also one of the sectors which employs the largest number of manpower. The Government of India

is also relying on foreign tourists as a favored travel destination and in promoting it further for revenue generation. Thus, e-tourism has become a major thrust area in our economy in the times to come.

Tourism is defined as 'services for people travelling to and staying outside their usual environment for less than one consecutive year for leisure or for business purposes'. It involves transport, accommodation, restaurants, cultural and leisure activities and could be more effectively viewed and evaluated as a market rather than an industry. Now-a-days tourists engage in a host of activities while availing the tourist's service ranging from information gathering to booking hotels, flights and arranging recreational activities for a novel experience. This has made it vital for the

marketers to evaluate and improve their website service quality and performance in order to enhance their online presence and competitiveness in the marketplace. The major challenge being faced by them is of identifying, attracting and retaining customers in e-tourism. Consumption in e-tourism can be categorized as engaging in: pre-trip, in-trip and post-trip activities. Like other services, in tourism consumption experience is complicated by intangibility, dynamism and subjectivity (O'Guinn and Belk, 1989; Botterill and Crompton, 1996; Jayanti and Ghosh, 1996).

Tourism consumption experiences include a complex mix of functional, objective and tangible components (e.g. travelling, eating, drinking, and recreating), but also diverse range of subjective and hedonic/emotional components (e.g. recreation, socializing). Many research studies have been conducted about the in-trip and post-trip consumption behavior of tourists but there is a little study understanding the pre-trip phase in tourism. This is where travel website's functionality can go a long way in information dissemination and influencing tourist's preferences besides providing them relevant information. The website is an important information technology tool that can be used to achieve many purposes (Zhang et al., 2000) such as delivering a wide variety of information and services (Auger, 2005), communication with customers and facilitation of business transactions (Van der Merwe and Bekker, 2003). It has been stated that companies of any size and any sector can benefit from the internet (Liang and Law, 2003; Gratzler and Winiwarter, 2004; Morrison, et al, 2004). However, presence on the Internet is not a guarantee of success (Liang and Law, 2003). The varied tourist's websites is creating problems in attracting consumers and even complicated in converting them into customers (Auger, 2005). It has been rightly mentioned that, "Even if one is able to attract successfully consumers to the site, still the challenge remains in offering them an effective, appreciably attractive and content-rich experience resulting in their satisfaction and loyalty.". Majority of the research studies in this context have explored only the factors affecting website's success. Still other studies have focussed on the website's features and usability as evaluation criteria of

website's success (Zhang and Dran, 2000; Nielsen, 2003).

In the tourism industry, although it is increasingly popular for companies to have an online presence, there are only a few studies in the literature on evaluation of websites. Previous website quality evaluation models have taken managers' views into consideration (Zafiroopoulos et al., 2005). It is vital to examine users' perceptions about a website because their views will give insight to service providers to manage a website effectively and thereby determine the eventual success. So, this study aims to identify the factors that affect the service quality perceptions of consumers in the Indian e-tourism.

Literature Review

A number of studies in the west have focussed on the advantages of Internet but they have limitations as to its actual viability in their businesses. A lot of scope exists for businesses, especially in tourism, that can be more effectively tapped with the use and application of IT. In this perspective, it has been stated that a website must deliver several essential features to create a better online experience (Chen and Wells, 1999). Websites that do not provide positive experiences may cause customers to decide that it is easier to go to a physical store rather than to purchase online (Van der Merwe and Bekker, 2003) or to switch to another site, which has no cost and is just a click away (Nielsen, 2003). According to researchers, it has been proved that 'poor web design will result in a loss of 50 per cent of potential sales due to users being unable to find what they want, and a loss of 40 per cent of potential repeat visits due to initial negative experience'. Because an effective website will be critical to the success of the business (Jeong et al., 2003), many researchers and practitioners have pointed out a list of items essential to a website's success. In one such study, Law and Wong (2003) identified the three most important factors in a successful website. These were secure payment methods, different price ranges for product/services, and user-friendly systems. On similar lines Kanayama et al. (2002), also pointed out that 'Content and usability are important in the context of efforts to raise the attractiveness of a

corporate website'. Furthermore, it is mentioned

that a good website should contain the information needed to enable a buying decision and it should also have entertainment value (Sparkes and Thomas, 2001), and as per Sigala (2003) websites must provide adequate functional support to meet customer's needs at every stage of their decision process. Thus, it can be inferred from these studies that information content and entertainment are important to e-tourists while engaging in pre-trip and in-trip consumption experiences. Academic researchers have also identified a number of criteria that customers use in evaluating websites. In their study, Barnes and Vidgen (2002) developed the WebQual and stated that the three attributes, namely, usability, information quality and service interaction quality affected the e-commerce quality from a user's perspective. Further, Madu and Madu (2002) proposed a model for e-quality and Zeithaml et al. (2002) also pointed out that perceived electronic service quality (e-SQ) could be represented by 11 dimensions. Thus, Parasuraman et al. (2005) developed the E-SQUAL, a multiple-item scale for assessing electronic service quality. Except for information availability and content, these included ease of use or usability, privacy/security, graphic style, and fulfilment (Zeithaml et al., 2002). Moreover, quality issues surrounding website design, in general, have been emphasised (Hope and Muhlemann, 1998; Parasuraman et al., 2005) and much has been written about the design of websites by the human engineering, business, and user interface (Palmer et al, 2002; Nielsen, 2003; Susser and Ariga, 2006). They studied the usability and effectiveness of websites and provided guidelines for making web pages more usable. Nielsen (2003) pointed out the importance of usability, and claimed that it is a necessary condition for survival. The goal of usability is to make a website more efficient and enjoyable for users to experience and is about making sure that the average person can use the site as intended. On the web, users first experience the usability of the site and then buy something. Better usability will result in a more efficient interaction between the user and the site and will increase the probability that the user will return and/or make a purchase.

Nowadays, 'internet customers are pickier, more demanding and have higher expectations, therefore excellent electronic service should be provided in order to fulfill their expectations' (Tonga et al., 2005). In their study, Ranganathan and Ganapathy (2002) stated that an effective website should serve as a major source of information, provide complete information on the products and services; allow quick access to information through tools like search engines; and provide decision aids for evaluating the alternatives. The researchers have suggested that successful website characteristics include information richness, regular updating, clear information paths, interactivity, and responsiveness to user feedback. Website evaluations have been fruitful in the past several years and included conceptual discussions on what should be evaluated and how to do it (Bell and Tang, 1998; Liu and Arnett, 2000; Zhang and Dran, 2000). In one study, Zafiroopoulos, Vrana, Vasiliki, Paschaloudis, Dimitrios (2006) found that these seven dimensions:- facilities information, customer contact information, reservation and prices information, surrounding area information, management of the web site, company information and communication were important in evaluating the performance of hotel websites from manager's perspective.

Thus, research studies have shown that effectiveness of a website is a function of information content, interaction and interchange, customer oriented webpage design, and, ease of use. Information content is the assessment of information provided on the website. It plays a key role in tourism purchase decision by making the offer tangible, helping in mental imagery and reducing risk that may be perceived in an online transaction. So, providing trustworthy, dependable and reliable information should be the prime motto of tourism websites. Studies have also proved that Information dissemination has three sub factors, like, presentation, sharing and supporting (Palmer, 2002; Law and Wong, 2003; Susser and Ariga, 2006). In context of e-tourism, presentation of information would include information of attractions in and around the place, tourism related news, policies and having a count of number of visitors visiting the site. Sharing of information consists of options given to visitors to share ideas, experiences and information and take part in online chats,

consultation and email facilities. Allowing users to email requests and replying questions on time is an effective way to attract online customers. The option of language translation would be an added advantage. Support services include online queries, maps, directions regarding reaching destinations and call for advertisements.

Further, as pointed by researchers, Interactivity is a unique and differentiating aspect with online marketing. Interactivity helps the viewers of the website to “interact” with the information that has been placed there. Users are delimited in their viewing experience within the limitations of available information. Visitors often find tourist websites via search engines, so it is important to grab their attention before they search for alternative websites and the use of photography is a good first step toward this objective. Although most of the information the viewers seek comes from the text, it is known that beautiful and striking layouts and images are helpful to capture attention and generate interest. Features providing information ranging from simple photographs to interactive video presentations will make the website more attractive, interesting and realistic to visitors. Use of voice and animation helps to make the information more informative and tangible. Further, ease of use is an important component in website design and an effective way to attract online customers. It should be user friendly and should guide visitors where to go, where to stay, what to do and how to get there.

In their study, Nusair and Kandampully (2008) identified six important dimensions for a successful web site, as: - navigability, playfulness, information quality, trust, personalization and responsiveness. Navigability relates to the user control of moving through website by number of clicks. It should provide user-friendly environment and functions that enable visitors to find what they need easily. Playfulness includes features such as animation, music, video and other multimedia effects. Information quality refers to amount, accuracy and form of information about the products and services offered on web site. Trust in an online context is “customer s based willingness to accept vulnerability in online transactions based on their positive expectations regarding future online store behaviors.” Personalization means giving customers individualized attention and

understanding the specific needs of the customers. Responsiveness is prompt response to customers inquires. These aspects were important according to them for a successful website. In the study, Huang et al. (2005) found that hedonic and utilitarian aspects are important factors affecting tourist’s satisfaction. Page design, managerial issues and information content are the three main points in website development (Hanna and Miller, 1997) and effectiveness of the website can enhance the overall perceptions of tourists to avail the service and be satisfied for future patronage. The websites in E-tourism thus must be ‘technically sound, interactive and user friendly. In addition to this, tourists will also prefer those websites which are reputed and provide them safe and secure transactions besides giving the desired information and enabling quick and easy transactions. A study was conducted by Jie Lu and Zi Lu (2004) in China to understand the user requirements, their behaviour and attitude in visiting the tourism websites. Besides it also aimed at understanding the user’s satisfaction levels and problems encountered by them. They found that there is not much correlation between number of tourism websites and the number of tourists visiting that place. The researchers argued that the number of tourists visiting a particular destination is dependent on factors, such as, reputation of landscapes, transport and real services rather than only on web promotion. In their study they also concluded that promoting tourism through website as a promotional tool contributed only partially to the customer’s attraction in the tourism industry. Similarly, Chen and Wells (1999) studied the customer’s attitudes towards the website, as to its advertising effectiveness. The findings suggest that consumer’s attitude toward the website may influence the attitude toward the ads shown from individual websites. That is, if a viewer likes the website, (s) he may be more receptive to advertisements played from within the website, and deeper processing of the advertisements may occur. Auger in his study on small businesses involved in Internet-based electronic commerce focused on the relationship between the design of a website and its performance. The results indicated that the level of interactivity of a website is positively associated with overall performance, but not associated with the number

of visitors. Results also showed that design sophistication is associated with a greater number of visitors but not with overall performance. In addition to this, other studies have also inferred a positive relationship between website service quality and satisfaction level of tourists (Huang et al., 2005; Ho and Lee, 2007). The e-tourism is transforming the face of the economy as a main revenue generator. So there is a vital need and scope for exploring the determinant forces shaping the face of competition in this industry, largely in India. Many research studies have been conducted in the west to explore website service quality but there are very few Indian studies in this context. The purpose of this study is to identify the dimensions of service quality perceptions of consumers in e-tourism in the Indian context. It also aims to understand the relative impact of these service quality dimensions on the satisfaction of the consumers.

RESEARCH METHOD

The extant review studies have proved that there have been many studies in the west exploring the relationships between the e-service quality and loyalty but there have been few studies in the Indian e-tourism. As e-tourism has great potential for the economy, it is imperative to understand the service quality dimensions and its relationship with consumer's satisfaction in the Indian context. This will have major implications for the tourism service providers to segment, target and position effectively. Moreover, they can understand the drivers of service quality and satisfaction for gaining competitive advantage in the evolving e-tourism sector in India.

Objectives of the Study

The main objectives of this study can be stated as follows:

- ✓ To understand the demographic characteristics and preferences of consumers in the Indian e-tourism.
- ✓ To understand the various dimensions affecting the service quality perceptions of consumers in the Indian e-tourism.
- ✓ To understand the relative impact of these service quality dimensions on consumer's

satisfaction.

Research Design and Methodology

The research design for this study is exploratory and the sample has been drawn from Delhi and NCR (National Capital Region). For this study, data was collected using structured questionnaire from a sample of 200 respondents in the National Capital Region. Out of those 164 were found valid for the purpose of data analysis.

The scale items used in this study were adapted from the literature review studies (Kaynama and Black, 2000; Madu and Madu, 2002; Ho and Lee, 2007), and modified accordingly in the Indian context. In the initial stage a pool of thirty five items was prepared after the literature survey. The questionnaire was pretested and modified using opinions from three academicians and two practitioners in the field of tourism industry. Finally, twenty seven items were selected. This was in conformance to the construct validity as used in other prior research studies. Instrument reliability i.e. the degree of consistency, was tested using 'Cronbach's Alpha coefficient'. For this study, the Cronbach Alpha score is good enough at values above 0.65. The statistical tools of Factor Analysis using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) was run to elicit the different items loading on the factors affecting service quality perceptions of the consumers. A multiple regression model was also prepared to know the relative impact of the service quality dimensions on the overall satisfaction of the consumers.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Exploratory factor analysis for the items followed by reliability analysis was performed first to explore the data structure. In this study five factors resulted from Factor analysis. These were Customer Interaction, Functionality, Information Content, Security and Responsiveness. Table 3 shows the % variance explained for the factors extracted and the respective loadings for the scale items. The total variance explained was 85% in the five factors extracted using the Principal Component Analysis method (table 4). The results of factor analysis for service quality are discussed as follows:

Table 1: Demographic characteristics of the sample

Gender	No. of Respondents	Percent	Education	No. of Respondents	Percent
Female	52	31.71	Post-Graduate	112	68.29
Male	112	68.29	Graduate	10	6.1
			Under Graduate	10	6.1
			School	32	19.51
Age (in years)			Family Income (in '000) per month		
18-25	44	26.83	<20	12	7.32
26-39	94	57.32	21-30	36	21.95
40-50	26	15.85	31-40	66	40.24
			>40	50	30.49
Occupation					
Business	11	6.71			
Professional	50	30.49			
Service	77	46.95			
Student	26	15.85			

Table 2: Characteristics of the sample

Booked Airline ticket online?	No. of Respondents	Percent
No	50	30.49
Yes	114	69.51
Booked Hotel Room online?		
No	138	84.15
Yes	26	15.85
Other Travel products booked online?		
No	112	68.29
Yes	52	31.71

Table 3: Factor analysis with varimax rotation rotated component matrix
KMO: 0.84, Sig (Bartlett's Test of Sphericity): 0.000

Item	Item Mean	Std. Deviation	Factor Name & (Cronbach Alpha)	Factor Loading
Customers are informed as the transaction is completed	3.47	0.995	Customer Interaction (0.99)	0.98
Provides a message channel for user's comments	3.11	1.121		0.98
Easy to track the delivery of the products/services purchased	3.3	0.84		0.98
Develops a platform for users to exchange travel experience	3.42	1.025		0.97
Provides URL links to other related sites	3	0.796		0.97
Easy for the users to turn to the chat room for more information	3.28	1.056		0.97
Products/Services are delivered by the time promised	3.42	1.018	Responsiveness (0.87)	0.97
Help available when the problem is encountered	2.79	0.895		0.97
Responds to user's inquiry promptly	2.63	1.136		0.96
Policies for cancelling orders laid out on the site are customer friendly	2.64	1.122		0.96
Has features personalized to users	2.66	1.12		0.95
Easy to find wanted information	3.42	0.992		0.87
Provides FAQ Information	3	1.078	0.8	
Has adequate secured feature to protect user's information	2.68	0.978	Security (0.92)	0.9
Company behind the site reputable	3.21	1.106		0.84
Won't give user's information to other sites	2.95	1.358		0.82
Feel personal privacy protected	2.37	1.088		0.8
Make full payment in online confirmation	3.11	1.413		0.68
Has comprehensive information	3.37	1.038	Information Content (0.67)	0.97
Information accurate	3.32	0.922		0.84
Information concise (not ambiguous)	3.21	0.895		0.65
Information updated	3.26	0.785		0.82
Provides in-depth information at the time of purchase	3.05	1.148	Functionality (.86)	0.57
Quick and easy to complete a transaction	3.26	1.209		0.64
Be linked quickly	3.37	0.873		0.62
Easy for customers to make or cancel order	3.32	1.302		0.56
Easy to manoeuvre	3.21	1.106		0.65

Table 4: Eigen values of the components

Component	Eigen Values	Variation %	Cumulative %
Customer Interaction	21.72	48.27	48.27
Responsiveness	10.53	23.41	71.68
Security	2.42	5.39	77.08
Information Content	2.22	4.94	82.02
Functionality	1.43	3.18	85.21

Service Quality Dimensions/Factors in the Indian E-tourism

The results of Factor analysis as conducted to identify the various dimensions/factors of service quality perceptions of consumers in the Indian e-tourism are as follows:

Factor 1: Customer Interaction contained six items and explained 48.27 % of the variance in the data. The six items related to the accessibility aspects of travel website, like provision of message channel, chat rooms, information to consumers on completion of the transaction, connectivity with other sites and ease of tracking delivery status of services.

Factor 2: Responsiveness referred to 7 items and explained 23.4 % of the variance in the data. The items were quick and prompt handling of problems, customer’s enquiry, timely delivery of services, ease of finding needed information, well-laid policies for cancelling orders and personalized features to enable e-users.

Factor 3: Security comprised of 5 items and explained 5.4% of the variance in the data. The items were provision of secured features to ensure personal privacy, safe feeling in transaction, full payment on confirmation and reputation of the site.

Factor 4: Information Content contained 4 items and explained 4.9 % of the variance in the data. The items related mainly with the quality of the information. These were comprehensive, accurate, and unambiguous and updated information.

Factor 5: Functionality composed of 5 items and explained 3.2 % of the variance in the data. The items were the Ease of use/navigation, ease of on line cancellations/reservations, and provision of in-depth information and speed of the website.

Relationship between Service Quality and Overall Satisfaction

As shown by tables 5 A and B of the Regression model depicting the relationship between the service quality dimensions and the overall satisfaction of consumers in the Indian e-tourism, it can be inferred that the five dimensions/factors together explain more than 60% variance in the overall satisfaction. Out of these, four dimensions were found having significant impact on the overall satisfaction of the tourists. The findings show that these service quality dimensions i.e. Customer Interaction, Information Content, Responsiveness and Security affected the overall satisfaction of consumers in the Indian e-tourism.

Good website design should provide user-friendly environment and functions that enable visitors to quickly complete the transaction without any difficulty. It is important for web sites to be quick on one hand, and on the other hand, visually appealing. Here, it must be noted that as the number and size of animations, pictures and sounds increase to make the webpage more visually appealing, it also reduces the speed of accessing and downloading of that webpage. So, there is a pertinent issue of trade-off between visual appeal of a website and speed of that website for effective customer interaction. Information content is another very important service quality dimension affecting

overall satisfaction. It refers to amount, accuracy and form of information about the products and services offered on web site. The width, update and depth of information are the top three variables which consumers perceive to be most important. Similar result was stated by Ranganathan and Ganapathy (2002) who concluded that an effective website should serve as a major source of information, providing complete information about products and services; allow quick access to information through tools like search engines; and provide decision aids to help in evaluating alternatives. Further, Responsiveness and security were also found to be other important service quality dimensions impacting the overall satisfaction of consumers in the Indian e-tourism. It refers to the willingness to help customers and provide prompt services. In the case of e-tourism due to absence of human interaction, it is important to provide personalized attention and solve customers' problems quickly whenever problem is encountered. This will improve consumer's

service quality perceptions. Besides, the study also showed that consumers also preferred websites that provided a sense of security to them. So, sites should be reputable and safe in transactions. Prior studies have also confirmed that security is a major area that affects service quality perceptions of tourists (Law and Wong, 2003; Nusair and Kandampully, 2007). These are important dimensions that have a significant impact on the satisfaction of consumers in the India e-tourism.

Apart from these findings, the study showed the demographic constitution for e-tourism comprising mainly of upper class, well educated (i.e. post graduates), male respondents, in service class and belonging to the age group of 26-39 years. They mainly used an online mode for availing services of airline ticket booking (69.51%). Very few respondents preferred booking hotel rooms online (15.85%). Tables 1 and 2 represents the demographic profile and characteristics of the respondents in the Indian e-tourism context.

Table 5 A: Regression results: dependent variable: overall satisfaction

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
	0.777	0.604	0.597	0.716

Table 5 B: Coefficients

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
(Constant)	0.025	0.224		0.113	0.91
Information Content	-0.474	0.107	-0.271	-4.413	0
Security	0.251	0.064	0.222	3.9	0
Functionality	-0.119	0.087	-0.097	-1.363	0.174
Customer Interaction	0.981	0.132	0.673	7.459	0
Responsiveness	0.343	0.08	0.262	4.308	0

CONCLUSION

This study has tried to examine the major factors affecting service quality perceptions of consumers in the Indian e-tourism and saliently, the relative impact of these dimensions on the overall satisfaction. Thus, the results have established that the five major dimensions of service quality perceptions were 'information content, security, functionality, customer interactions, and responsiveness' in the Indian e-tourism. Out of these dimensions, only four of them i.e. 'customer interaction, information content, responsiveness and security' impacted the overall satisfaction of consumers. Thus, functionality had no impact on the satisfaction level of consumers in the Indian e-tourism.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It can be inferred from this study that e-tourism is poised to be a mainstay sector for the Indian economy in the times to come. But there are major challenges that consumers face as in any e-transaction, like minimal switching costs, no personalization and few social cues. Moreover, the problems are compounded due to presence of experiential elements in a tourism service encounter. So, managing various components of service quality that drive satisfaction of consumers is imperative. The tourism service providers must manage the service quality dimensions of information content, speed and ease of transaction from a customer's perspective. Moreover, they should minimize the perceived risk by ensuring responsiveness and security in the e-tourism to drive satisfaction of the consumers.

LIMITATIONS

The Indian e-tourism is still at a nascent stage only and not many respondents actually transact through an online mode. So, generating ample responses and generalizing it further has limited the scope of the study. Apart from this, geographical limitations were other constraining factors for this study. In addition, the moderate R square value of 0.604 suggests that more qualitative research is required. Studies adopting tools like structural equation modeling can be used to find out precisely the inter-relationships between the perceived service quality dimensions in the e-tourism.

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