

SATISFACTION OF ONLINE TRIP PLANNING: A MIXED-METHOD APPROACH

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Today most travelers who have Internet access will log online to search for destination information, plan their trips, and purchase tourism products (Milligan 2006). In fact, tourism has become the number one industry in terms of online transaction volume (Werthner and Klein 1999; Werthner and Ricci 2004). The significance of the Internet to travelers and the tourism industry has been well documented and tourism marketing organizations have steadily realized the importance of online marketing and accordingly adopted online strategies (Werthner and Ricci 2004; Lee, Cai and O'Leary 2006; Lehto, Dae-Young and Morrison 2006; Wang and Fesenmaier 2006; Kim, Lehto and Morrison 2007). Not only can the Internet reduce transaction costs and overcome time and distance constraints; more importantly, the Internet can also foster a structural change for the tourism industry in terms of consumer and producer power balance (Pires, Stanton and Rita 2006). Travelers are empowered by the Internet: (Pires, Stanton and Rita 2006): for example, a traveler's choice sets for a single vacation destination are dramatically increased through online channels. Travelers can also connect with other travelers by reading other online blogs, comments and feedbacks regarding a certain product. Especially for intangible and experiential tourism products, this new market poses great challenges for tourism businesses and destinations in terms of appropriate management and marketing strategies. As the marketers' first step of contact with the visitors and a precursor to the real visiting experience, making trip planning on the Internet a satisfactory experience is getting crucial.

This presentation will illustrate two lab studies on online trip planning with 30 college students in the United States as the subjects. Using the same mixed-method of think-aloud protocol, process tracing and clickstream analysis (Ericsson and Simon 1993), one study involves trip planning to San Diego, California (Pan and Fesenmaier 2006) and another one is

planning trips to China. The focus of the studies is investigating the determinants of satisfactory online trip planning experience. Two aspects of satisfaction, outcome satisfaction (satisfaction toward the outcome of the planning) and process satisfaction (satisfaction toward the process of trip planning) were studied (de Bruijin and de Vreede 1999). Relevant studies on information search and Human-Computer Interaction have demonstrated information searchers have different semantic models in comparison to those of designers, and the discrepancy between the two will lead to difficulties and usability problems (Norman 1990; Nielsen 1993). However, the first study shows that the congruence of the two models did not contribute to higher satisfactory trip planning experience. Instead, travelers are looking for novel, exciting and enjoyable information (hedonic needs) beyond their own mental model (Vogt and Fesenmaier 1998). The functional needs are the hygiene factors without which the searchers will not be satisfied (Herzberg 1968); it was exciting and novel destination information which will boost the searchers' satisfaction to a higher level. The second study showed that when planning a trip online to a novel destination with a different culture, the subjects encountered many usability problems and their satisfaction level seemed to be much lower compared with planning trips to San Diego. Among the 88 usability problems reported by 15 subjects, 80% of them are due to cultural barriers such as the lack of background knowledge about Chinese culture and geography and inappropriate translation (Pan et al. under review). The two studies demonstrated that: the subjects are more satisfied with the process than the outcome of the trip planning; higher level of satisfaction of trip planning is determined by novel and exciting tourist information on the web. However, a lack of appropriate cultural background of the destination will lead to many usability problems. The overwhelming amount of novel information can be detrimental to satisfactory trip planning experience. The marketing and design implications will also be discussed in this presentation.

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