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TRAVEL INFORMATION SEARCH ON THE INTERNET:
AN EXPLORATORY STUDY

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THESIS

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ABSTRACT

The revolutionary development of information technology changed the society and people's lives, including the way travelers search for information and plan their trips. Research showed that more and more travelers log on the Internet to book airline tickets, check out hotel room availability and find out destination information. However, an in-depth understanding of travel information search on the Internet has not been achieved due to limited research. The offering of travel information and the design of travel web sites are mostly based on general web design principles. However, travel planning and travel information search is a complex, multi-faceted, and dynamic process, and likely to differ with different types of media/information channels. Based on user-centered design principles, the understanding of the process of travel information search and trip planning on the Internet is essential to the development of useful information technology for tourism.

This research intends to investigate the process of travel information search and trip planning on the Internet and further investigate users' satisfaction through different semantics of tourism. Two intermediate concepts, semantic mental models of travelers and the semantic model of the travel information space are introduced. Each individual travel information searcher navigates through the travel information space following his/her idiosyncratic semantic mental model, and the interaction between his/her semantic mental model and the travel information space determines the specific information space s/he encounters. The discrepancy between semantic mental models of travelers and the semantic model of the travel information space represents the different

views toward tourism; this discrepancy is the origin of usability problems and further influences the satisfaction of travel information search.

This research used a trip planning exercise to explore the structure of trip planning online and users' satisfaction in this process. The results showed that travelers used a variety of web sites to search for information and they had different semantic mental models regarding the same destination. Consequently, they encountered different travel information space. They searched for "information hub" pages which contain a list of links to different attractions or accommodations. Their information search process can be broken up into different episodes and each episode is targeting at a specific aspect of trip planning. Several episodes constitute a chapter which is one facet (accommodation, dining, attraction or transportation) of a travel plan. The results also showed that users' satisfaction is not only determined by the efficiency of finding relevant information; as an extension of the travel process, the travel information searchers are also looking for exciting and novel information which is beyond their semantic mental models and their initial expectation. The theoretical contribution of this study and implications for designing better information technology for the tourism industry are discussed and future research directions are detailed.

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