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Research Paper

A study of e-commerce adoption by tourism websites in China

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ABSTRACT

Planning and booking a trip online is now increasingly common for travelers. This study evaluated 258 Chinese tourism websites (CTWs) using a content analysis technique that assessed website performance in terms of e-commerce adoption. The current study aims to elucidate the status of e-commerce adoption among different types of websites. The analysis revealed significant differences in performance between the types of websites, and online travel agencies (OTAs) were found to perform better than other types of tourism websites. The results also revealed that CTWs are not using the Internet to its full potential, as most tourism websites focus on providing basic information services, especially the official tourism websites (OTWs). Suggestions are made concerning how to improve the performance of CTWs and potential avenues for future research are discussed.

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1. Introduction

The rapid growth in the number of tourists using the Internet to seek information and to make online reservations provides clear evidence of the popularity of the Internet amongst tourists in China (Fernández-Cavia, Rovira, Díaz-Luque, & Cavaller, 2014; Law, Qi, & Buhalis, 2010). In 2013, there were 2.8 billion Internet users worldwide (Internet World Stats, 2013). In China, the number of Internet users has dramatically increased, growing from 2.25 million in 2000 to 0.62 billion in 2013 (Internet World Stats, 2013), representing the greatest number of users in Asia.

In 2010, China replaced Spain as the world's third most visited country, behind France and the United States (Bastida & Huan, 2014). The China National Tourism Administration (CNTA, 2013) reports that Chinese domestic tourism is a \$428.12 billion market, with the number of inbound tourists reaching 129 million. Chinese tourists' interest in travel is increasing, highlighting the huge potential of China's online travel industry.

Given the growth of the Internet and of the Chinese tourism market, electronic commerce has an important effect on how tourism products and services are sold (Pollock, 1995; Williams & Palmer, 1999). For the purposes of this paper, e-commerce is defined as the buying and selling of goods and services or the conduct of financial transactions over the Internet.

The Internet is moving into a new era of e-commerce and

communication (Chiou, Lin, & Perng, 2011; Kim, Kim, & Han, 2007). Tourism websites provide opportunities for tourism organizations to promote their products and communicate with tourists and potential tourists (Stepchenkova, Tang, Jang, Kirilenko, & Morrison, 2010). Simultaneously, these websites provide a major information resource for tourists before they arrive at their destination and during their travel (D'Ambra & Mistilis, 2005; Shi, 2006). These websites offer specific information on accessible restaurants, transportation, attractions, and hotels.

Website content has been identified as one of the main factors contributing to repeat visits (Rosen & Purinton, 2004). When choosing a destination, visitors get detailed information such as address, pictures, a map, facilities, reference rates and reviews. The content of tourism destination websites conveys images of the destination and creates a virtual experience for the consumer (Doolin, Burgess, & Cooper, 2002). Because of their role in providing information, tourism websites are becoming increasingly important as a destination marketing tool for tourism organizations (Lee, Cai, & O'Leary, 2006), and they are the most frequently visited online information source by travelers (Chiou, et al., 2011). Tourism websites not only serve as a key promotional vehicle but also as a major distribution channel for domestic and international tourism (Lee, et al., 2006). These websites provide tourism information, and access to products and services for tourists and potential tourists.

Tourism organizations need to consider whether the facilities and services they provide to facilitate e-commerce could be improved to attract more visitors. For example, the more that tourism websites provide a higher level of e-commerce adoption for communications and business transactions such as orders and

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payments, the more likelihood they are to turn a potential tourist into an actual tourist. However, there is currently little published information about e-commerce activities in the Chinese tourism industry. In this research, based on the work of Qi, Law, and Buhalis (2008), and building upon their classification, Chinese tourism websites (CTWs) of three types were selected for analysis, namely, attraction websites (AWs), official tourism websites (OTWs), and online travel agents (OTAs). These websites reflect the real situation in a destination with respect to e-commerce adoption among CTWs. The research objective is to discover which CTWs are using e-commerce and how it is utilized. This involved measuring the performance of e-commerce adoption in various tourism websites. The study asks two research questions.

Research Question 1. What is the state of e-commerce adoption among CTWs?

Research Question 2. How do the three types of tourism websites perform in terms of website features?

2. Study background

2.1. Tourism E-commerce adoption in china

E-commerce has impacted the sales of tourism products and services, often resulting in higher profitability (Chu, Leung, Hui, & Cheung, 2007; Palvia, 2009); further, e-commerce offers benefits such as around-the-clock availability, accessibility, speed of access, wider selection of goods and services, and international reach (Tech Target, 2005). Tourism suppliers and agencies offer products and services online and also offer the benefit of reducing service costs, providing more high-quality services and attracting customers (Lu, Lu, & Zhang, 2002). Tourism organizations in China have moved more and more business activities and services online (Lu & Lu, 2004).

According to the China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC, 2014a), at the end of December 2014, China had 649 million internet users, with 222 million travelers who made online travel reservations. This is an increase of 22.7% compared to 2013, increasing the utilization rate from 29.3% to 34.2% of all Internet users. According to the CNNIC (2014b) report, online booking was more popular in 2014 than in previous years (see Fig. 1) with the purchase of train tickets (26.6%), air tickets (13.5%), hotels (13%), and travel packages (7.6%). However, the US reached an online utilization rate of 70% in 2012, China's online travel market thus possesses enormous market potential (CNNIC, 2012–2013).

According to a survey report of the China Tourism Academy (CTA, 2011), e-commerce associated with tourism continues with the provision of the traditional services of air tickets, hotels, and consulting business. Moreover, a new emerging trend includes booking tickets for attractions and travel group buying. The survey shows that the three most popular online services include booking airline tickets, booking hotels, and looking for tourism information, used by 61%, 45.4%, and 44.6% of respondents respectively

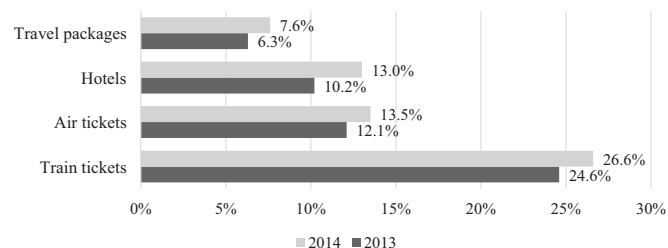


Fig. 1. 2013–2014 e-commerce utilization rates for various types of travel product in China (CNNIC, 2014b).

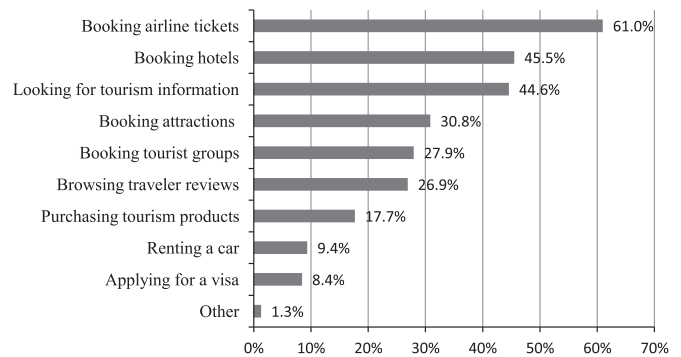


Fig. 2. Online leisure trip-planning activities (CTA, 2011).

(see Fig. 2).

Searching for information on tourism websites is important to tourists and potential tourists because it helps them to understand the destinations and supports their decision to travel. Fodness and Murray (1997) reported that visitors will use different types of information channels that can provide information to support their travel plans, thereby reducing the risk of making a purchase and improving the quality of tourism services, Tourists can thereby make more informed decisions by booking hotels before traveling, comparing prices to find the most cost effective tourism products, and reading reviews. CTWs originally provided a simple design and limited information services, but now more tourism organizations have started to invest in the development of websites and provide various online tourism services, with the result that more professional, comprehensive and high-quality tourism websites have emerged (Lu & Lu, 2004).

OTWs are important marketing tools for tourist destinations (Del Vasto-Terrientes, Fernández-Cavia, Huertas, Moreno, & Valls, 2015). They are funded by government and are monitored by provincial tourism administrations, such as the local official provincial tourism websites in Beijing, Shanghai, and Shandong. Although OTWs are not focused specifically on profit, they do increase visits to a destination and the sales of the related products (So & Morrison, 2004). The emergence of OTAs allows for a networked traditional travel agency sales model and for more interactive communication that is convenient for tourists. According to China Internet Network Information Center, (2014b) report on OTAs, sites such as Ctrip (ctrip.com), Quna (qunar.com) and Taobao travel (alitrip.com), have become popular options for online travel planning.

AWs are particularly important because the provision of computer-mediated information can increase tourists' awareness and interest, thereby increasing the likelihood of them visiting a specific attraction (Zhong, Leung, Law, Wu, & Shao, 2014). The highest official ranking accorded to Chinese tourist attractions is 5A, promising a high quality on-site experience. According to the Tourist Attraction Rating Categories of China (CNTA, 2007), 5A-level attractions must meet 12 criteria, such as transportation, sanitation, safety, tour availability, shopping, management, environmental quality, etc. AWs are funded by a scenic area management committee or tourism enterprises and, for example, the Jiuzhaigou, Mount Taishan and Mount Huangshan tourist attraction websites provide details of scenic spots along with online booking opportunities.

2.2. Website evaluation studies

A variety of different website evaluation methods and tools have been introduced in recent years. Chiou et al. (2011) reviewed the most common approaches, including content analysis, benchmarking, survey, experiment, case study, and automatic

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