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Usefulness of Tour Operators' Websites for the Distribution and Selling of Holiday Products and Services: The Case Study of Websites of Tour Operators in Zimbabwe

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Abstract:
The majority of tourists are using information communication technologies (ICTs) to search for holiday products and services. The growth in the development of websites by enterprises in the tourism industry is a response to the changing buying behaviour of tourists. The majority of tour operators in Zimbabwe have established websites that endeavour to meet the holiday information needs of potential tourists. The aim of this study was to evaluate the usefulness of tour operators' websites as a channel for providing holiday information to potential clients and as platforms for transacting. A random sample of 76 tour operators was chosen from the national tourist organization's register of tour operators. The websites of the tour operators were evaluated using ten variables which included; accessibility; functionality, usability; quality of information, on-line payment capability, navigability, interactivity, design and aesthetic attractiveness, value addition links and translation capabilities. The study showed that the majority of the websites were platforms for information provision to potential tourists and that only very few of them offered the tourists the ability to instantly pay for the holiday products they would have chosen. It was not concluded that the majority of the tour operators' websites in Zimbabwe were at an initial phase of development and that they were not effective channels of product distribution nor were they appropriate platforms for e-commerce transactions. It was recommended that the government though the Ministry of Tourism and Hospitality Industry (MOTHI) organizes training programmes for tour operating managers on the role of information communication technologies in the marketing and selling of tourism products. This will assist the managers to understand the critical role that websites play as a platform for generating sales for enterprises in the tourism industry.

Keywords: *Websites, tourism products, ICTs, e-commerce, evaluation, marketing*

1. Introduction

The distribution channels of tourism products and services have experienced tremendous changes during the last five decades (Poon, 1993, Buhalis and Soo, 2010). The changes have been induced by the development of information communication technologies (ICTs). The internet and the use of the World Wide Web have created new channel relationships within the tourism industry. The new technologies have led to an explosive growth of websites across different sectors of the economy including the tourism industry (Sismanidou, Palacious and Tafur, 2008). Tour operators in both developed and developing countries have endeavoured to establish their own websites with the aim of making sure that their products are exposed to as wide a market as possible. These efforts have met with different levels of success.

The aim of this study was to analyze the websites of tour operators based in Harare and Victoria Falls with a view of evaluating their usefulness as platforms for distribution and selling of tourist products and services. The study focuses on the outcomes of the websites evaluation process that the researcher undertook using the websites of randomly selected tour operators in Zimbabwe.

2. Literature Review

The internet and the World Wide Web have become the main sources of holiday information for tourists (Fotis, Buhalis and Rossides 2013). The numbers of people using the internet to source for holiday information has experienced dramatic growth in recent years (PhoCusWright Inc. 2009; Servani and Elmazi; 2008). The popularity of the internet as a source of holiday information is a result of the numerous advantages that the technology offers the tourists. Some of these include the following:

- Availability of information throughout the day;
- Accessibility of information from different parts of the world;
- Ability to get instant replies to requests;
- Ability to create individualized holiday packages;
- Ability to access information from the comfort of one's home; and
- The ability to pay for requested products and services using plastic money.

Tour operators in both the developed and developing countries have found it essential to avail their holiday products on the internet in order to ensure that they are exposed to the market. This is due to the fact that the tourism business transacted over the internet has experienced continued growth in recent years. For example, Euromonitor International (2014:6) indicated that globally online sales increased from US$500 billion in 2012 to US$590 billion in 2014. It further indicated that in 2014 a total of 80 million travel search and bookings were captured from the websites daily (*ibid*: 32). The increasing importance of online transactions is also reflected in the growth of online sales of the major developed countries' tour operators. For example, TUI's online sales increased from 25% in 2010 to 35% in 2013 and that of Thomas Cook Group rose from 21% in 2010 to 36% in 2013 (Euromonitor International: 2014:26)

The increasing importance of the internet as a platform for transacting tourism business has resulted in a number of studies aimed at evaluating the quality and of effectiveness of travel websites. Limayen, Hillier and Vogel (2003) examined 80 websites of travel companies in Hong Kong with a view of establishing their sophistication for e-commerce transaction and overall appeal to the potential clients. The indicators used for the evaluation ranged from interface usability to e-business services. They concluded that the travel industry in Hong Kong was still at "the tip of the iceberg" with regarded to the sophistication of their websites (*ibid*; 10). They needed to improve in a number of areas for example e-CRM. A study of travel agent's operators in Singapore (Abou-Shouket, Lim and Megicks 2013) concluded that direct bookings and ability to transact were provided by very few travel agents.

A similar study was carried out by Walcott (2007) in Barbados who evaluated websites of enterprises in nine sectors in the country including tourism. The six criteria for evaluation ranged from company information and profile to product/services information and promotion. His overall conclusion was that both the private sector and government needed to invest more in their websites in order to ensure that they remain relevant to the needs of their customers.

Rafael and Ferraz (2014) in their study of websites of the travel industry in Portugal posit that the websites lacked a number of tools which help to increase the interface between the enterprises and the customers. They further argued that that the businesses lacked interests in investing more resources in the improvement of their websites. They concluded that the information provided on the websites was mainly geared to the needs of potential clients and hence neglecting other key stakeholders in the tourism industry. They further postulated that the majority of the websites had very limited linkages to social media which was a major tool used by tourists to source for travel information as well for communicating with their peers on a range of issues including travel plans.

Law, Qi and Buhalis (2010) undertook a detailed review of website evaluation in tourism research. They concluded that the evaluation studies undertaken then could be divided into five approaches:

- Counting of attributes of the websites from a set checklist;
- Automated approaches whereby researchers use an evaluation software;
- Numerical computations of websites variables using mathematical formula;
- User judgement approaches whereby the perceptions of users on the utility of the websites were measured; and
- Combined methods where the researchers used more than one approach in the evaluation of the website.

They argued that each of the methods used had deficiencies which needed to be taken cognisance of whenever similar studies are undertaken. They concluded that research on website evaluation was still in its infancy and that more work needed to be undertaken before generalizations could be offered.

In their study of website quality assessment criteria Moustakis, Charalambos, Dalivgas and Tsironis (2004) provided five broad criteria: content, navigation, structure and design appearance and multimedia and uniqueness. Each of the five criteria was divided into a number of subdivisions covering a range of variables of the website, for example, utility of content, reliability of content, convenience of navigation, loading speed and graphics representation. The study indicated the relative importance of the key variables as well as the sub-variables of websites to the overall contribution of these criteria to the utility of the website to potential customers.

Booth and Jansen (2009) undertook an overview of website analytics, measurement of visitor behaviour on websites, and developed key performance indicators (KPIs) that companies could use to measure the usefulness of their websites for generating business. They concluded that companies can improve websites performance through appropriate analysis of the outcomes of the key performance indicators. Similar arguments were advanced by Hoekstra, Huizingh, Bijmolt and Krawczyk (2015) who postulated that the success of websites was hinged on the balance between the general information provided on the website and its e-commerce functionality. They pointed out that effective return on investment on the websites is often depended on how far customer needs have been incorporated in the overall design and architecture of the website.

3. Methodology

This study used the Zimbabwe Tourist Authority's register of tour operators as a sampling frame for choosing tour operators whose websites were to be evaluated. A total of 76 tour operators was randomly selected from the ZTA register. Ten indicators were used for the evaluation of the websites. These included the following: functionality, accessibility, usability, navigability, interactivity, quality of information, online payment capability, design and aesthetic attractiveness, value addition links and translation capabilities. The evaluation process entailed accessing each of the 76 websites using Google search engine, noting the quality and characteristics of each website in line with each indicator. The indicators were rated from a scale of 0-10 using descriptive terms as shown in table 1.

Scale	Rating
0	Very poor
1	Poor
2	Rudimentary
3	Basic
4	Below average
5	Fair
6	Average
7	Good
8	Very good
9	Outstanding
10	Excellent

Table 1: Scale used to evaluate website indicators

4. Findings

4.1. Reliability Analysis

The Cronbach's alpha for the 10 items analyzed from a sample of 76 tour operator websites resulted in an alpha of 0.886. Being greater than 0.70, it was therefore concluded that the instrument was internally consistent, hence reliable.

4.2. Websites Descriptive Analysis

Table 2 shows a summary of the descriptive analysis of the website evaluation.

Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation
Accessibility	8.11	1.793
Functionality	7.51	2.036
Usability	7.51	1.936
Navigability	7.46	2.010
Quality of information	7.25	1.967
Design and aesthetic attractiveness	6.96	2.259
Interactivity	6.16	2.551
Value addition links	5.96	2.909
Translation capabilities	1.50	3.062
Online payment capability	1.33	2.645

Table 2: Descriptive Analysis of Websites

Table 2 shows that overall; the highest average rating of the websites was accessibility, with a mean rating of 8.11 out of 10. The second highly rated features for the websites were functionality and usability whose mean ratings were 7.51. The other more significant features were navigability and quality of information with average ratings of 7.46 and 7.25 respectively. The table further indicates that design and aesthetics, interactivity and value addition links had mean ratings of 6.96, 6.16 and 5.96 respectively. The indicators with the least ratings were online payment capabilities and translation capabilities whose means stood at 1.33 and 1.50.

The standard deviations shown in Table 2 relate to the overall evaluation of the websites with those variables having high mean rating also having low standard deviations, for example accessibility and usability had low standard deviations of 1.793 and 1.967 respectively. Similarly, online payment capabilities and translation capabilities had very low mean ratings with high standard deviations of 2.645 and 3.062 respectively. However, the table also shows that there were a number of indicators which did not conform to this pattern, for example whilst functionality had a high mean rating of 7.51 it also had a high standard deviation of 2.036. The results therefore revealed that whilst there was coherence of means and standard deviations in certain variables there was also some divergence in others. The websites of the tour operators ranged from those that were offered clients' high quality of services in-terms of the variables evaluated to those offering clients very poor quality of services. Table 2 also shows that in general the majority

of the websites did not offer the customers' ability to pay for their holidays on line. The same observation relates to translation capability of the websites whereby only a handful of them offered the facility.
The means and standard deviations were useful indicators in terms of showing the general characteristics of the tour operators' websites. However, in order to get the relative importance of each indicator with regard to their utility for potential clients the Friedman's Rank analysis was performed. The results from the computation are shown in Table 3.

Indicator	Mean Rank	Overall Rank
Accessibility	7.2	1
Usability	6.93	2
Functionality	6.7	3
Navigability	6.59	4
Quality of information	6.50	5
Design and aesthetic attractiveness	6.15	6
Interactivity	5.12	7
Value addition links	4.98	8
Online payment capability	2.14	9
Translation capabilities	2.06	10

Table 3: Friedman's ranking of the indicators

Table 3 shows that accessibility was the most useful functionality of the websites. It was easy to open the majority of the websites. The second ranked indicator was usability of the websites whilst the third ranked feature was functionality. Navigability was ranked fourth with Quality of information being ranked the fifth. The table further shows that the least ranked features of the tour operators' websites were online payment capabilities and translation capabilities which stood at the ninth and tenth rank respectively.
It can therefore be concluded that essentially, Zimbabwean tour operator websites were mainly centered on operational issues such as accessibility and usability and hardly on facilitating e-commerce. Despite their accessibility, the low ranking of translation capabilities meant that the tour operators were only able to promote their products to the English speaking market segments. They therefore cut themselves out a large pool of non-English-speaking potential customers.

4.3. Website Utility Ratings
In order to explore the relationships between the variables further, aggregate utility ratings for the websites were computed as the arithmetic total of the 10 ratings. The results are shown Table 4. Table

Descriptive Statistic	Aggregate Rating
Mean	59.75
Median	60.00
Standard deviation	15.85
Minimum	22.00
Maximum	96.00

Table 4: Aggregate website utility ratings

Table 4 shows that the average rating of the websites was 59.75%, with the median rating being 60.0%. The minimum rating was 22.00, while the maximum rating was 96.00, and the corresponding standard deviation for this distribution was 15.85, a not-so-significant deviation. From the analysis of Table 4 it follows that the distribution of the website ratings was rather normally distributed, suggesting an even distribution of ratings about the median rating.

4.4. Factor Analysis of the Website Indicators
To further explore the associations among the assessed website evaluation indicators, dimension reduction techniques were employed, specifically, factor analysis. The Factor Analysis was done based on the 10 website evaluation indicators and this was done using the Principal Component Analysis (PCA) as the extraction method, with Varimax as the rotation method. The minimum eigenvalue threshold for the extraction of components was 1.0, and results from the component extraction are presented in Table 5.

Component	Initial Eigen values			Extraction Sums of Squared Loadings			Rotation Sums of Squared Loadings		
	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %
1	5.411	54.112	54.112	5.411	54.112	54.112	5.310	53.099	53.099
2	1.218	12.179	66.291	1.218	12.179	66.291	1.319	13.192	66.291
3	.871	8.714	75.005						
4	.725	7.251	82.256						
5	.556	5.564	87.820						
6	.385	3.852	91.672						
7	.286	2.859	94.531						
8	.229	2.289	96.821						
9	.171	1.710	98.531						
10	.147	1.469	100.000						
Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.									

Table 5: Total Variance Explained-Website Functionality

Table 5 reveals that from the 10 variables, only 2 components were extracted with eigenvalues greater than 1.0. The highest percentage of variance was characterized by first component, being 53.099% while the second component had a variance of 13.192%. The cumulative variance in website functionality explained by both components was 66.291%, suggesting that approximately 43.709% of the variation in website functionality was not explained by just these two components. The corresponding rotated component matrix is presented in Table 6.

Variable	Component	
	1	2
Accessibility	**.821**	
Functionality	**.891**	
Usability	**.893**	
Navigability	**.847**	
Interactivity	**.699**	
Quality of information	**.819**	
Online payment capability		**.891**
Design and aesthetic attractiveness	**.790**	
Value addition links	**.556**	
Translation capabilities	**.482**	

Table 6: Rotated Component Matrix: Website Functionality

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis

Table 6 shows that Component 1, with the greatest percentage variation contribution comprised of the following features: accessibility, functionality, usability, navigability, interactivity, quality of information, design and aesthetic attractiveness and value addition links. Translation capabilities, though extracted in the first component, were, however, weakly presented, with the least factor coefficient of 0.482. Overall, it can be summed up that component 1 comprised of mainly information provision and accessibility capabilities. On the other hand, Component 2, with the least percentage variation contribution comprised of only online payment capability. The analysis highlights the fact that the function of the majority of the websites was providing information to the tourists and that very few of them had e-commerce capabilities.

5. Discussion

The findings of the study showed that websites of Zimbabwean tour operators exhibited the following characteristics:

- High accessibility
- Provision of a wide range of products and services information;
- General high quality of usability;
- Varied efficiency in functionality;
- High disparity in design and aesthetics;
- Varied levels of interactivity;
- General low levels of e-commerce capability;
- Good but varied levels of navigability; and
- Very low levels of translation capabilities.

5.1. High Accessibility

The majority of the websites were highly accessible. The variable had a high mean of 8.11 with a low standard deviation of 1.793. In general terms it meant that potential clients did not encounter difficulties in opening and generally using the websites of the tour operators. This characteristic of the websites revealed that the country had personnel with the requisite skills to design basic websites.

5.2. Provision of a Wide Range of Products and Services Information

All the websites evaluated provided potential clients with information about their products and services. In the majority of cases information provision was the main function of the website. The information provided included among others the following: tourist attractions in the country; tour itineraries, company profiles, news items, booking forms, press releases; contact details, travel tips, sections where customers could post their reviews about the companies' services and weather conditions in the country throughout the year. The focus on provision of varied content on the websites resulted from the general understanding of the tour operators that websites were now a key major product distribution channel.

However, the huge disparity in quality, depth and type of information provided in the different websites helped to show that a large number of the country's tour operators had limited understanding of the importance that customers put on websites as a source for making decisions about their holidays. For example, a number of the websites did not have site maps therefore potential customers could not relate the proposed itineraries to the physical position of the country. A number of the websites had out-of-date information in terms of their newsletters, prices and products. Further very few of the websites had menu options for frequently asked questions (FAQs). It was also noted that very few of the websites effectively combined multimedia tools to communicate their services and products to the potential clients. In the majority of cases tour operators combined only videos and photographs to depict their products. There was hardly any use of audio information on the websites of the tour operators. These deficiencies were also highlighted by Rafael and Ferraz (2014) in their study of websites of tourism companies in Portugal. The lack of audio presentation of the products and services resulted from the tour operators' inability to appreciate the characteristics of the current tourists who is now demanding more real- time and visually impressive presentation of product information before they can consider purchasing what is being offered.

It needs to be pointed out that whilst provision of information was generally good, there were a number of websites where this was not the case. For example, there were several small tour operator websites which had no information about the country's tourist attractions, medical advice, currency issues and visa requirements. These websites were therefore not useful tools for promotion of tour operator products and services and projected a poor image of the company in the minds of the potential clients.

5.3. General High Quality of Usability of Websites

When the Friedman Rank Analysis was used to rank the ten variables of the tour operators' website usability was ranked 2nd. In general terms usability refers to the user friendliness of the websites, relating to the potential tourists' ability to open and use the website without encountering difficulties. The analysis therefore shored that the user- interface of the websites were generally good. This was very important in terms of the ability of the tour operators to promote their products to the potential tourists because when website usability is difficult potential clients migrate to alternative websites leading to loss of potential business to the tour operator.

It is, however, important to point out that there were a number of websites in the sample whose usability was very low and hence repelled potential tourists to the sites. One of the major contributing factors to the establishment of websites with poor usability was lack of finance for enterprises to engage skilled web-developers. A number of the tour operators turned to amateur web designers whose fees they could afford. But the long-term effect on the company was reduction of clients visiting the websites which in-turn reduced the potential sales the company could generate through the website. Lack of clear objectives in establishing websites also contributed to their low usability. Some of the companies developed websites in order to be in-line with what was trendy in the sector without giving adequate thought on what they wanted to achieve through the tool.

5.4. Varied Efficiency in Functionality

The overall efficiency of the websites to meet the needs of the potential clients was varied. This was in terms technical issues like speed of the websites, ability to download documents and the ability to obtain required information without technical glitches. The differences shown in this variable was a reflection of the general characteristics of the tour operating enterprises in Zimbabwe which were dominated by small family owned businesses. The medium –sized company- owned enterprises had the financial and technical ability to develop websites that had good functionalities. This was not the case with the smaller family- owned companies which had limited financial resources and limited vision on the use of ICTs.

5.5. High Disparity in Design and Aesthetics

Websites design and aesthetics covers a number of elements which include colour, typography, video clips and flash animations. These elements have direct impact on issues like the visual appeal of the website to the potential client, the joy of user of the platform the image the website conveys to the customer, the length of time the potential customer may spent on the website (Thorlacius, L.;2007) and simple navigation paths. In view of differences in the size and characteristics of the tour operators in Zimbabwe, the diversity in management understands of the role of technology in business operations and the overall cost of developing and maintaining websites it was not surprising that there were significance differences on the variable between the tour operators. For example, some websites were only in black and white and were devoid of any animation. In essence they were nothing but copies of

black and white brochures of the companies in question. The net effect of these differences was that potential clients were more likely to log on to the good quality website to search for holidays to the Zimbabwe

5.6. Varied Levels of Interactivity

Website interactivity is a key variable because it enables the potential customer to receive instants answers to the questions they may have on products and services of the company. A large number of the websites of the tour operators were static and hence their responsiveness to the customer inquiries was very low. There were however websites that were highly interactive the majority of which had on line chat capabilities. Potential clients were therefore able to have live communication with the personnel of these companies on any issues they needed clarifications. The differences in the quality of this variable across the sampled tour operators were revealed by a high standard deviation of 2.551. It was critical for tour operators to improve the interactivity of their websites because the attention span of the current tourist is very short. Tourists preferred to spent more of their time on those websites where they felt that they received closer personal attention from product providers than at those where personal attention was nonexistence.

5.7. General Low Levels of E-Commerce Capability

The on-line payment capability received the lowest mean of 1.33 with a fairly high standard deviation of 2. 645.The analysis revealed that overall the tour operators' websites did not offer potential customers the opportunity to book and pay for their holidays on-line. A number of the websites advised the clients of their banking details to which payments for holidays booked should be transferred. This was an acceptable model of doing business in the 21st century. Tourists were accustomed to transact on e-commerce platforms for the majority of their purchases. The situation obtaining on the tour operators' websites was therefore anachronistic hence clients were likely to purchase their holidays from source market tour operators whose websites offer the e-commerce capabilities.

5.8. Good but Varied Levels of Navigability

The majority of the websites were easy to navigate across. Potential clients were therefore able to find specific items they were searching for without difficulties. However, the fairly high standard deviation of 2.010 was indicative of the differences that existed within the different websites sampled. In reality there were several websites which had very basic errors like having no information at all on search buttons on the home page. The omissions created a negative image of the company in the minds of the tourists. It further eroded the trust tourists had on the general information given on the websites and hence forced potential customers to look for more creditable websites from which to purchase their holidays to Zimbabwe.

5.9. Very Low Levels of Translation Capabilities

The variable had the lowest mean of 1.50 and a high standard deviation of 3.06. The analysis revealed that the majority of the websites used only English as a medium of communication with potential customers. This characteristic of the websites reflected the low level of understanding of information communication technologies on the part of the managers entrusted with running these companies. The internet has enabled potential customers from different parts of the world to access these platforms. Hence lack of translation capabilities meant that a huge market potential was unable to use the websites to source for holiday information to Zimbabwe. The managers' inability to understand the role ICTs in business operations is highlighted by the fact that the software that are used for automatic language translations were not expensive. The absence of the transaction capability on the tour operators' website was therefore mainly a result of managers' ignorance on ICTs. The high standard deviations reflected the fact that there were few companies that had the variable fully established on their websites.

6. Conclusion

The study revealed that the majority of the websites of the tour operators in Zimbabwe were in the initial phase of development. They lacked the level of sophistication that the tourists were expecting. The tour operators lacked awareness of the impact that good websites had for generating sales, for brand identity and for creating mutually beneficial relationship with customers. Further, the tour operators exhibited ignorance on the crucial role that social media networks and links to other stakeholders' websites play in attracting traffic to their own websites. In order for the tour operators to generate meaningful levels of sales from their websites it is essential for these platforms to have e-commerce capabilities.

7. Recommendations

It is recommended that the Ministry of Tourism and Hospitality Industry (MOTHI) rolls out training on ICTs utilization in the tourism industry. The training will help to create the missing awareness within the tour operators' managers of the role that information communication technologies play in business operations. It is further recommended that the MOTHI arranges educational tours for tour operator managers to neighboring countries like South Africa and Mauritius where they can be exposed to how far their counterparts had adopted ICTs in their business operations.

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