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ELECTRONIC TOURISM QUALITY FOR ENHANCING TOURIST RELATIONSHIP

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ABSTRACT

The objectives of this paper are to identify the components of the E-tourism quality and to determine E-tourism quality factors that have impact on enhancing tourist relationship. Data was collected from Thai and foreign tourists. Exploratory factor analysis was conducted to determine the components for E-tourism quality. The results show that the two major components of E-tourism quality are E-service quality and E-marketing management quality. E-tourism service quality consists of four dimensions which are 1) website design quality, 2) E-service design quality, 3) technology quality and 4) customer service quality. E-marketing management, E-service design, technology quality and customer service quality have impact on tourist relationship. E-marketing management quality has the highest influence on enhancing tourist relationship whereas website design quality has no impact.

Keywords: E-tourism quality, E-tourism Service Quality, E-tourism Marketing Management Quality, Relationship

INTRODUCTION

In the tourism industry, many organizations have developed websites and web applications to provide information, communicate, and make service transactions for their customers. The internet creates value through allowing tourists to access information and use services anytime and anywhere. The internet offers opportunities to enhance revenue and reduce costs for many stakeholders. In addition, the internet allows businesses to redesign their business processes and bring service to customers more efficiently.

In 2009, the Thai government initiated a policy to increase revenue from the tourism sector. The Department of Tourism was established with the mission to improve the quality of the Thai tourism industry which led to the development of electronic tourism (E-tourism) management in Thailand meant to increase business opportunities and revenues. However, the quality of traditional tourism services differs greatly from electronic services via the internet. There are very few studies on online service quality offering conclusive guidance on the quality of electronic services in an e-tourism context [30][19]. Moreover, providing service quality that is value-adding for customers can enhance relationships. Relationship is created when valuable services are designed into the service system to help clients to operate more efficiently, such as technical support assistance, or use of software provided by the service provider. This relationship can raise the clients' costs to switch to other competitors, is the most difficult for competitors to imitate [2] [3].

This study aims to explore the components of service quality in E-tourism from the perspective of foreign and Thai tourists and to assess E-tourism quality components that have impact on building tourist relationship.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Customer Relationship

Relationship marketing has been conceptualized in different ways among academic researchers. For instance, Grönroos [5] defined relationship marketing as "marketing to establish, maintain, enhance and commercialize customer relationships so as the objectives of the parties are met. Gummesson [10] defined a marketing relationship as relationships, network and interaction. He pointed out that the strength of the relationship can be enhanced through internal measures or from outside the organization. In other words, relationship marketing provides an approach that helps businesses to establish relationships with customers and other parties involved in the business process.

E-Service Quality

Traditionally, the SERVQUAL model [18] is used to assess customer perception of service quality from service providers. It consists of reliability, responsiveness, competence, access, courtesy, communication, credibility, security, understanding customers, and tangible. Grönroos [9] proposed a functional quality and a technical quality to evaluate service quality. However, the service quality perceived by customers through direct personal interaction with a service provider differs from service quality perception when interacting with online services via the internet. Attributes such as the quality of the website used as the channel of service will impact a customer's perception of quality. Electronic service quality, as measured by the ES-QUAL model [19], eTailQ model [30], SITEQUAL model [32], WebQual model [14], and e-SQ model [33], have modified the service quality model to suit the environment of electronic service quality. For instance, electronic service quality includes website and information quality, aesthetic design, immediate response, security and privacy [1] [5] [12] [13] [21] [28] [31] [33]. Rotchanakitumnuai [22] proposed that electronic service quality should emphasize the quality of service design, customer support, web design, and technology support. In this study, service quality will cover all services related to the E-tourism industry including website quality, customer service quality, and the quality of information technology that supports the electronic services [24].

The quality of website design relates to how an E-tourism website provides relevant and timely data in an easily updatable

manner, and provides easily understood information [4] [8] [25]. Electronic service design quality must ensure user-friendly processes [32] and be attractive to customers [25]. Customer service quality is related to customer support before, during, and after the service [19] [28]. In order to build trust with users, the quality of technology support requires that electronic services system must be secure with guaranteed privacy [8] [23]. Customer relationship is enhanced when quality services are designed into the service system to assist customers to operate more efficiently (e.g. technical support assistance, electronic service) [2] [3].

Therefore, the hypotheses for the study are:

H1: The higher tourists perceived website design quality, the higher customer relationship creation.

H2: The higher tourists perceived electronic service design quality, the higher customer relationship creation.

H3: The higher tourists perceived technology quality, the higher customer relationship creation.

H4: The higher tourists perceived customer support quality, the higher customer relationship creation.

In addition, electronic marketing management is a major factor that can enhance customer relationships [26] [27]. Pricing as the key factor for customer satisfaction [6] [11] [15] [16]. Moreover, promotion, advertising, the branding of websites, and integration of communication channels all build a relationship with customers [4] [7] [10] [17] [20] [29]. The last hypothesis is:

H5: The higher tourists perceived E-marketing management quality, the higher customer relationship creation.

METHODOLOGY

This research employed a questionnaire to measure the perception of Thai and International tourists on E-Tourism service quality. Judgment sampling was applied to select and interview the targeted respondents who use tourism websites to search for travel information. Respondent characteristics are described in Table 1.

Table 1. Respondent Profile

Characteristics	Thai Tourists		International Tourists		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Gender						
Female	153	56.9	199	40.9	352	46.7
Male	115	42.8	287	59.1	402	53.3
Age						
Below 30	87	32.3	191	39.3	278	36.8
30 – 40	139	51.7	208	42.8	347	46.0
Above 40– 50	32	11.9	60	12.3	92	12.2
Above 50- 60	8	3.0	26	5.3	34	4.5
Above 60	3	1.1	1	0.2	4	0.5
Education						
Below Bachelor	4	1.5	35	7.2	39	5.3
Bachelor	151	56.1	382	78.6	533	73.0
Master	103	38.3	43	8.8	146	20.0
PhD	8	3.0	4	0.8	12	1.6

DATA ANALYSIS

Table 2 shows two E-tourism quality components. The first component is E-tourism service quality. The second component is E-marketing management quality. E-tourism service quality consists of four factors: website design quality, service design quality, technology quality, and customer support quality. All constructs of E-tourism quality components have high levels of reliability with Cronbach's Alpha values ranging from 0.632 - 0.785, indicating good reliability. For E-tourism website design quality, overall the tourists ranked up-to-date information (4.46) and easy to understand information (4.37) with high mean scores. Service design quality that is simple to use and make transactions has a high mean score (4.25). Security (4.19) and privacy policy protection (4.14) are the two most important issues of technology quality.

Respondents rated E-marketing management items with mean scores from 4.05-4.10. A wide variety of products/services offering scored highest (4.10), Followed by lower price policy for transactions via website (4.06), and promotions via digital channels (4.05).

Multiple regression analysis was performed to determine the impact of E-tourism quality on customer relationship. Factor scores on each factor for each respondent served as input to further regression analysis. The results are summarized in Table 3. The overall regression model was significant with 38 percent of the variance in strength of customer relationship explained by these independent variables, as indicated by the R^2 . E-marketing management, E-service design, technology quality and customer service quality have impact on tourist relationship. E-marketing management quality has the highest influence on enhancing tourist relationship whereas website design quality has no impact.

Table 2. Factor Analysis

Factor / Item	Factor Loading	Mean	S.D.
1 E-tourism Service Quality			
1.1 Website Design Quality (Cronbach's Alpha = .695)			
The website provides easy to understand tourism information	.792	4.37	.672
The website provides up-to-date tourism information	.806	4.46	.651
The website provides complete tourism information	.742	4.26	.656
The website provides multiple languages of tourism information	.540	3.99	.815
1.2 Service Design Quality (Cronbach's Alpha = .632)			
The website is designed as simple to use and make transactions.	.782	4.25	.712
The website is aesthetic.	.752	4.01	.700
The website is designed for easy searching to get related information.	.742	4.20	.723
1.3 Technology Quality (Cronbach's Alpha = .708)			
The website provides good security technology.	.745	4.14	.807
The website supports a large volume of transactions.	.662	3.99	.776
The website loads quickly.	.754	4.19	.796
The website upholds its privacy policy.	.759	4.13	.823
1.4 Customer Support Quality (Cronbach's Alpha = .688)			
The website provides an immediate response to customers after transactions finish.	.785	4.09	.788
The website provides 24/7 customer service.	.845	4.02	.841
The website provides social networks to communicate and share information with customers/between customers.	.722	3.96	.812
2 E-marketing Management Quality (Cronbach's Alpha = .785)			
The service provider has a lower price policy for transaction via website.	.597	4.05	.768
The service provider uses digital channels for promotion/PR (e.g., website / social network).	.794	4.08	.692
The service provider uses digital channels to communicate with travelers / customers (e.g., website/social network).	.797	4.07	.703
The service provider offers a variety of tourism products/services for target customers.	.746	4.10	.700
The service provider offers customized tourism programs for individuals.	.726	4.08	.736

Table 3: Impact of E-Tourism Quality on Customer Relationship

Factor	β	Sig.
Constant	1.307	.000**
Website Design Quality	.014	.750
Service Design Quality	.127	.000**
Technology Quality	.139	.000**
Customer Support Quality	.063	.035*
E-Marketing Management Quality	.373	.000**

$R^2 = .381$

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

In conclusion, E-tourism quality consists of two components: E-tourism service quality and E-marketing management quality. Website design quality, E-service design quality, technology quality, and customer support quality are the four dimensions of E-tourism service quality. A tourism website must be designed to provide easy-to-understand tourism information, provided that it

is up-to-date, complete, and supporting multiple languages. Tourists gave highest importance to the items of website design quality providing up-to-date and easily-understood tourism information.

E-tourism service providers must concern themselves with service design quality in terms of ease-of-use and conducting transactions, information search functions, and aesthetics. Management and investment in E-tourism technology must provide more efficient services. Tourists prefer to interact with a fast loading website that is secure and provides protection of privacy for customer information. The findings also indicate that respondents have high degree of interest in online customer support. Respondents also indicated that an immediate response to customer transactions is of great importance in determining the quality of a provider.

E-marketing management is also necessary to ensure the quality of E-tourism. For instance, using a lower price policy is a major incentive for tourists to conduct their transactions online. E-tourism service providers can use digital channels to promote and communicate to stakeholders. Moreover, travel services can be easily customized to a specific group of customers.

E-marketing management has the highest impact on enhancing tourist relationship. E-service design, technology quality and customer service quality also have impact on tourist relationship whereas website design quality has no impact.

This study can serve as a basis for evaluating E-tourism quality for the improvement of the E-tourism development in Thailand. Firstly, the results show that E-tourism service quality is critical to the achievement of four factors: website design, service design, technology, and customer support. Secondly, E-marketing management requires greater focus as this factor can enhance the relationship between tourists and E-tourism service providers. Future research should consider the readiness of E-tourism service providers to investigate the impact of these components on actual performance.

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