

TOPIC: E-SERVICE QUALITY CONCERNS IN INDIAN E-TOURISM INDUSTRY

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Abstract

Internet has significantly revolutionized travel industry in the last decade. The Indian tourism industry, which is at the stage of an upward growth, can be greatly influenced by e-tourism. It has become vital for E-service tourism companies to understand the customer requirement and meet their expectations by evaluating and improving their website quality. The study identified few dimensions of E-Service quality (information quality, customization, reliability, website design, privacy, access, responsiveness) on the basis of past studies. The Tamil Nadu tourism website has been evaluated on the basis the dimensions. The website has rich information content and good website design but the sometimes does not load quickly and has cluttered information.

Keywords: *E-service quality, tourism, website, customer, Internet*



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Introduction

The recent advancement in technology has facilitated commerce around the globe. The mass acceptance of the electronic media as a vital and efficient means of communication has come to be seen as a dominant marketing force. Recent development in the realm of information technology has brought the internet and its component the World Wide Web to the attention of marketers. The internet represents one of the largest e-platforms for the business in the B2C sector which not only offers tremendous opportunities for marketers, but also innovative and dynamic way of conducting consumer markets (Hoffman 1995). The unique capability of the web to blend text, pictures, sounds and video clips into multimedia documents has pre-determined the extensive use of the internet beyond its traditional academic boundaries and made it a popular marketing medium globally. The advancement and spread in information and communication technology has spread a wave of competition among companies and brought about a change in their quality and methods of conducting business. According to Internet World Statistics (2014), nearly 40% of world population is

internet users. The percentage of population with internet has increased from 15.8% in 2005 to 40.5% in 2014¹

Online Tourism Industry

Internet has significantly revolutionized travel industry in the last decade. Tourism is defined as ‘Services for the people travelling to and staying outside their usual environment for less than one consecutive year for leisure activities and could be more effectively viewed and evaluated as a market rather than an industry (**Karekar 2014**). The spread of electronic network has greatly transformed the business and consumer behavior even in Tourism Industry. E-services have out shined and have become one of the star features of this transformation. Tourism and internet are intricately related in today’s world (**Karekar 2014**). As a result a new way of conducting business has evolved, even in tourism industry i.e. e-tourism. In fact e-tourism has now come to the fore front due to surge in the tourist activities world over. The traditional forms of tourism are giving way to new forms of Tourism based on innovative customized services broadly influenced through e-tourism.

-an Indian perspective

The Indian tourism industry, which is at the stage of an upward growth, can be greatly influenced by e-tourism. Tourism is stated to be the third largest net foreign exchange earner for our country and also one of the sectors which employees number of man power (**as cited by Karekar 2014**). The online tourism and travel industry is evolving at a fast pace in India. Within the domestic travel and tourism industry, the online travel segment has significantly grown over the past few years. India’s online travel segment is expected to grow 17.8% during 2013–2016, outperforming the overall travel market by 6.0 percentage points. Online travel (online gross bookings) now constitutes an estimated 41% of the overall Indian travel market (2014). The high degree of convenience, increasing e-Commerce penetration, rapidly increasing Internet and mobile penetration, and a growing middle-class population are some of the factors boosting online travel bookings. Online penetration in travel and tourism bookings is estimated to increase from 41% in 2014 to 46% in 2017, according to

¹ www.internetlivestats.com/internet/users)¹

Phocuswright, a leading travel data aggregator². According to IAMAI Digital Commerce Report 2014, online travel in India, over the years, has been the largest digital commerce segment in terms of revenue generation³. Online travel sales volume in India amounted to 5.37 billion U.S dollars in 2010 and is expected to increase to 30.61 billion U.S. dollars in 2016⁴. This tendency suggests e-tourism is going to be one of the major markets in the e-commerce sector characterized by heavy competition, tourism companies need to provide something else to attract customers. The tourism marketers need to deliver superior e-service quality to customers. Recent studies suggest that website e-SQ is important boosters of customer's satisfaction in the tourism sector.

E-service quality

The internet has become one of the most important platforms for travel related service entrepreneurs to provide services and communicate information with their target customers. The number of travel related websites has grown rapidly during the past decade and the competition has become more intense than ever. To survive or even succeed, entrepreneurs need to be customer oriented (Ho & Lee 2006). The internet offers the tourist to search and gather information, book hotels, and rail and air tickets and arrange recreational activities at lower cost than usual. It has become vital for E-service tourism companies to understand the customer requirement and meet their expectations by evaluating and improving their website quality. The increasing growth of online consumer's purchases offers both challenges and opportunities for hospitality and tourism business (Bai et al; 2008). Therefore it becomes important for tourism companies doing business on the web to understand their client's perception about E-service quality and further satisfy their customers and build loyalty for long term customer value.

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(www.aranca.com/knowledge/center/special/report/765/india/online/travel/industry/potential-for-rapid-growth)²

³ (www.iamai.in/reports/.aspx)³.

⁴ www.staissta.com/statistics/249705/forecast-of-online/travel-sales-volume-in-india)⁴

The service and interaction that happens online is known as E-service (Ho & Lin 2010). E-services are web based and does not require person to person communication. The difference between the traditional services and E-services are:-

1. The absence of sales staff. In an E-service there is no service encounter between customer and the sale staff as in traditional services.
2. The absence of traditional tangible. In E-service, service process is almost completed in the virtual environment with some intangible elements.
3. Self Services of Customers. In E-service, customers conduct self service in purchasing and realize control in business process (Li & Suomi 2009).

Within the context of E-commerce, E-service quality is recognized as one of the key determinants for success or failure (Carlson & O'Cass, 2010). Santos (2003) defined E-service quality as a customer's perceptions judgments and evaluation of the quality of services acquired from an online shopping website. Zeithaml (2002) defined E-services quality as the extent to which a website provides efficient and effective purchasing and delivery of goods or services. The websites which satisfy the customers in terms of services quality are willing to revisit the website and repurchase it; however customers that experience low service quality favour other websites.

The SERVQUAL model developed by Parasuraman et.al (1985, 1988) has been the most extensively and successfully used service quality measurement in twenty first century. The widely used SERVQUAL instrument is composed of five dimensions which are based on the original ten dimensions. The five dimensions of SERVQUAL as suggested by Parasurman et. al. (1985, 1988) are

- 1) Tangibles- The appearance of physical facilities, equipment, personnel and communication materials.
- 2) Reliability- The ability to perform promised service dependably and accurately.
- 3) Responsiveness- The willingness to help customers and provide prompt service.
- 4) Assurance- The knowledge and courtesy of employees and then ability to convey trust and confidence.
- 5) Empathy- Care and individualized attention provided to customers.

A variation in instrument was developed for use in e-commerce context. (E-SERVQUAL model) by Parasuraman, Zeithaml & Malhotra (2005). E-SERVQUAL can be classified into two scales; E-S-QUAL or core scale, and E-RecS-QUAL or recovery scale. The four dimensions of E-S-QUAL used were efficiency, fulfillment, system availability and privacy and security with 22 items. For RecS-QUAL, two dimensions used were responsiveness and contact with eight items.

Review of Literature

Kaynama & Black (2000) conducted study to develop a model for measuring and improving service delivery quality in the electronic commerce setting. Using the E-Qual model, the service quality for hybrid (brick and mortar agencies with e-presence) and purely online travel services (e-commerce) was analyzed. A preliminary E-QUAL scale with seven dimensions- content, accessibility, navigation, design and presentation, responsiveness and feedback, background information and personalization and customization was developed. The E-QUAL scale was tested to fourteen hybrid agencies and nine online agencies. The online agencies selected were high on consumer use. To test the responsiveness component of the E-QUAL scale for each hybrid and online travel agency, an e-mail question requesting specific information was sent to each company. The results of the study showed that online companies provided much more information on discounts, travel destination as compared to hybrid agencies. Further the hybrid agencies fared better on navigation features. Both type of agencies lacked behind responsiveness criteria.

Madu & Madu (2002) identified dimensions that customers use to assess the quality of a virtual service operation. The study further investigated about the factors that were perceived by customers as a necessity in achieving customer satisfaction in a virtual operation. Based on the review of literature the 15 dimensions for e-quality were identified- performance, features, structure, aesthetics, reliability, storage capability, serviceability, security and system integrity, trust, responsiveness, product/ service differentiation and customization, web store policies, reputation, assurance, empathy

Anderson et.al. (2002) investigated the antecedents and consequences of customer loyalty in an online business-to-consumer (B2C) context. To find the antecedents of e-loyalty, an in-depth interview was conducted with 45 individuals who purchased products online. On the

basis of interview, eight e-business factors were identified that had an impact on loyalty. These factors were- customization, contact, interactivity, cultivation, care, community, choice, convenience, and character. The study further developed scales to measure these factors. Data was collected from 1211, online customers through e-mails. The findings of the study revealed that all factors except convenience had an impact on loyalty. The dimensions of character and care had highest impact on loyalty. Further e-loyalty was found to have positive impact on positive word-of-mouth and willingness to pay more.

Aladwani & Palvia (2002) developed an instrument for web site quality based on four dimensions- specific content, content quality, appearance and technical adequacy. At first stage, 55- item instrument was designed and data was collected from 101 web users who were students of business school. Reliability was computed and 30- item instrument was examined for dimensionality and 25-item instrument was formed and again tested using a sample of 125 students. The results of two step investigation revealed four dimensions of perceived web quality (specific content, content quality, appearance and technical adequacy).

Parasuraman et.al. (2005) conducted study to develop and design a multiple item scale (E-SQUAL) for measuring the service quality delivered by websites on which customers shop online. A set of 121 items representing 11 facets of e-SQ- reliability, responsiveness, access, flexibility, ease of navigation, efficiency, assurance/trust, security/privacy, price knowledge, site aesthetics, customization/personalization were formed. Two questionnaires with different scale anchors and formats were designed and data was collected in two focus groups from graduate students at major university United States. A revised questionnaire was prepared with 113 items. In the second stage, the revised questionnaire was designed to collect data from sets of respondents i.e. internet users through online survey. Quota sampling was used for data collection. Sample consisted of 549 respondents who sufficient online shopping experience. Factor analysis was done and four factors were extracted-efficiency, fulfillment, system availability and privacy. An e-recovery service quality scale (E-RecSQual) was developed which consisted of three dimensions- responsiveness, compensation and contact. To further assess the scale's reliability, validity and relative importance of various e-SQ dimensions in customer's overall quality, value perception and loyalty, empirical research was conducted on two online stores-amazon.com and walmart.com. It was concluded that

efficiency and fulfillment are the most critical and important dimensions of web service quality as well as perceived value and loyalty intentions. Further System availability and privacy dimension do significantly influence customer's evaluation of overall quality perceived value and loyalty intentions.

Ho and Lee (2006) identified the dimensions of e-travel service quality. A 44 scale item capturing e-travel service quality was generated. The scale was pre-tested from 50 online purchasers of e-travel products. A 30 item questionnaire was extracted. In order to identify dimensions of e-travel service quality, an online survey was conducted and data was collected from 456 purchasers of online travel products. Factor analysis was conducted and five factors were extracted- website functionality, responsiveness and fulfillment, customer relationship, information quality and security. The study found that website functionality and customer relationship were most critical factors in evaluating e-travel service quality. The study further conducted path analysis to test the relationship between e-service quality, satisfaction and behavioral loyalty. The results indicated that service quality had a direct effect on satisfaction and the effect of service quality on loyalty intentions was also important.

Li et.al. (2009) focused on e-service quality dimensions with empirical study on online travel service. The study developed an e-service quality scale. Seven dimensions of e-service quality from customer's perspective were included-ease of use, website design, reliability, system availability, privacy, responsiveness and empathy. Two dimensions were included from customer's perspective- experience and trust. Data was collected through mail from 503 customers of some online travel companies in China. Data analysis was performed using Partial Least Squares. The results of the study indicate that trust from customer's perspective and ease of use from online company's perspective are most critical and important facets in customer's perception of online travel service quality.

Tourism as an industry has a wide scope in our economy. According to the World Tourism Organization (WTO), tourism is one of the biggest and fastest growing industries in the world. Travel & Tourism generated US\$7.6 trillion (10% of global GDP) and 277 million jobs (1 in 11 jobs) to the global economy in 2014 – 9.8% of total world GDP. Out of 141 countries, India's travel and tourism industry secured 52nd position in the Travel and Tourism Competitiveness Index (TTCI) 2014. Web representation is especially critical for some

industries and tourism which among other things sells packages for travelling to different destinations, is one of them. The tourism industry is often suggested having ideal product for marketing in digital marketplace. Recent trend in online sales of travel and tourism related services suggest that this sector is steadily growing. Within the domestic travel and tourism industry, the online travel segment has significantly grown over the past few years. India's online travel segment is expected to grow 17.8% during 2013–2016, outperforming the overall travel market by 6.0 percentage points. Online travel (online gross bookings) now constitutes an estimated 41% of the overall Indian travel market (2014). While travelling becoming cheap and affordable, the number of travelers and their frequency of travelling in India is increasing continuously This tendency suggests e-tourism is going to be one of the major markets in e-commerce sector characterized by heavy competition and it brings attention of tourism marketers the issue relevant to the delivery of superior e-service quality to customers.

Objectives of the study

- 1) To identify the dimension of e-service quality on the basis of past studies
- 2) To evaluate the website of Tami Nadu State

Research Methodology

For the purpose of study, secondary data has been used. To identify the dimensions of e-service quality, previous studies in the related area has been used. Website of Tamil Nadu Tourism Development Corporation has been evaluated on the basis of few of the dimensions of E-service Quality identified above. Tamil Nadu has been chosen as the area of study as it has been ranked as number one state in terms of tourist arrivals in the year 2015.

E-Service Quality Dimensions

- 1) **Information Quality**- The information made available by the websites has been widely accepted as a key component of the e-service quality (Barrera and Carrion, 2014). The travel and tourism is an information-oriented business, and the internet can provide companies with an arena to construct a rich and dynamic platform for information supply exchange (Ho & Lee, 2007). Information quality requires providing trustworthy and dependable information should be the prime motto of tourism companies. Information quality requires that

1. Information should be correct
2. Information should be dependable and significant
3. Information should be updated

According to Sheldon (1997) travel products are unique and it is required in communicating a great quantity of varied information from supplier to consumer. When the information available on tourism websites is complete it would eventually influence the online satisfaction as well as travelers purchase intentions. Content of information directly affects a customer's perception and evaluation of the usefulness of a website. Travel websites need to provide information which helps the customer's understanding of the product description, price description, and information to relevant websites.

2) Security- Security refers to the attributes of privacy that are vital for making transactions online. Since the customers purchase products online without physical exchange of credit card or cash, it is critical to secure the safety of the transactions on a website (Ho & Lee, 2006). Security/ privacy of dimensions include

1. Secure transactions
2. Privacy

The privacy of a website should be reflected through symbols and messages to ensure security of payment and customer's personal information not being shared.(Barrera & Carrion, 2013).Security has been considered as being critical dimensions in terms of e-service quality and satisfaction.

3) **Easy to Use-** Perceived ease of use is defined as the extent to which one believes that using a particular system would be free of effort (Joen, 2009). This dimension contains three aspects.

- **Navigation-** Navigation deals with how effortlessly users search for information within the websites. Because of absence of dealings with personal, online customers need to locate information and find products by themselves. The design and presentation of a website including a navigation mechanism affects the relevance and efficiency of the outcome of searching (Ho and Lee, 2006). Navigational quality implies that the site contains functions helping customers find what they need without difficulty utilizes a go

search engine, and allows customer to maneuver easily, logically and quickly back and forth through the pages (Zeithaml et.al., 2000)

- It means how easily website gets connected and what is the download speed. If the customers can easily find travel related information on the websites, less likely the users would shift to other websites.
 - Third aspect deals with extent to which a customer feels that website is simple, intuitive and user friendly (Anderson et .al., 2002).
- 4) **Website Design-** The way information is presented in terms of color use, layout, number, relevance and quality of pictures, font size and style will affect the way customers respond to the service. Website design includes
1. visual appeal
 2. Innovativeness.

Innovativeness is associated with creativity and uniqueness. A website design with an aesthetic layout and pleasing experience may attract customers if it generates pleasurable feelings associated with the online experience. The entertainment constructs consists of visual appeal (presentation graphics and text (Loiacono et.al., 2002)).The layout of a website should provide a clear structure that enable users to find important at first sight, text has be always displayed legibly with proper font size and print size, images or symbols should be suitable colors of animation(Poon & Lee, 2012). The design of a website plays an important role in attracting sustaining and retaining of a customer at a site (Ranganathan & Ganapathy 2002).

- 5) **Customization-** Customization is the ability of website to tailor products, services and transactional environment to individual customers (Srinivasan et.al 2002). If a travel company helps to provide products according to the needs and preferences of customers, it would reduce their browsing time and hence provide them with relevant and required information. Customization would include
- Customized Products and services
 - Customized payment options
- 6) **Reliability/Fulfilment-** This dimension refers to a website's success in delivering product/service and its willingness to correct mistakes that occur during transactions. Reliability aspect deals with accuracy of services promises, billing and product

information (Zeithmal. et al., 2000). Online travel companies are required to book the correct room /rooms of the hotel for number of days ordered by customer as well as provide the right package as advertised by the company. The following aspects are covered in reliability dimension

1. Exact delivery service
 2. Total order service
 3. Company order service
 4. Company being truthful about its offering
 5. The online service always correct
- 7) **Responsiveness-** Responsiveness refers to the quick response and availability of help for customers. It is the willingness and speed with which the support staff of a web service provider makes the initial response to inquiries from users (Khalifa & Mohamed 2014.) In e-services the companies which provide prompt service to solve their problems quickly, make their customers more comfort able and satisfied. The dimensions of responsiveness includes
1. Adequate contact information and performance
 2. Prompt response to customers
 3. Timely response to customers
 4. Adequate response time
 5. Quickly solve problems (Hongxiu & Suomi 2009)
- 8) **Access/ contact-** Access/ Contact is defined as the customer's ability to speak to live customer service agent online or through phone (Zeithaml et al .2002). A website should display its street, e-mail, phone number.

The State of Tamil Nadu

Tamil Nadu is in the south-eastern part of the Indian Peninsula has some of the most remarkable temple architecture in the country, and a living tradition of music, dance, folk arts and fine arts.⁵ The state has witnessed the maximum number of foreign(4684707 share 20.1) 2 and domestic tourist(333459047 share 23.3) in the year 2015. The state has a dedicated website for providing information to tourist and making online bookings with the link

⁵ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tourism_in_Tamil_Nadu

www.tamilnadutourism.org/. based on some of the dimensions of website quality above, an analysis of website of the state of Tamil nadu has been done

Information Quality: When a visitor visits a website they want and expect the website to offer extensive information. If the website is rich in content, visitors would like to get back to the website. There is a dedicated and exclusive website of the state of Tamil Nadu with the name tamilnadutourism.org. The website provides information about tourism in the state of Tamil Nadu. Presenting trustworthy, dependable and reliable information should be the prime motto of tourism websites. Presentation of information includes information of attractions in and around places, tourism related news, policies, having a count of number of visitors visiting the state. Tamil Nadu tourism website has provided rich information which has been displayed on the homepage. Information content on the website of the state included information about Tamil Nadu Development Corporation, the hotels covered under the corporation, facilities provided. The website also provides information about Department of Tourism, facilities about online booking of hotels. The primary feature the visitors are drawn to are deals and packages offered to them. They should prominently be displayed on home page which has been done by Tamil Nadu tourism website through links. Tourism activity involves six basic elements food, travelling, wandering, relaxation and shopping. The Website of Tamil Nadu tourism provides information on all the basic elements either on home page or through certain links. The website provides the facility about online booking. It also provides information on tour packages available and advance booking of these packages. Through its policy note the websites gives information about the tourist arrivals in the state as well as initiative taken to develop tourism in the state. TTDC (Tamil Nadu Development Corporation) has earned the distinction of being the first state to introduce online bookings of hotels and tours. During 2015-16 they generated revenue of **Rs** 10.07 crores. But the website lacks in providing information about the best tourist season, connectivity to other states. The site provides information about mode of transport but which is the best mode is not provided by the website. Moreover the website does not provide information or link to rail booking or air booking.

Website Design: Tourism industry is a visual industry. “Seeing is believing” so tourist need to offer visual treat to visitors visiting the site. The tourism website designers should focus on

how the site can sell and get new visitors to visit the destination. The role of the tourism websites is also to encourage those who once visited to revisit the website and make booking again. As far as visual treat is concerned, Tamil Nadu tourism has offered variety of videos and picture gallery which demonstrates scenic beauty and richness of the destinations. Proper font size, proper use of colors, and good quality of pictures has been used by the website.

Ease of use: It is an important component as ease of using the website helps the tourist to quickly navigate and get information what they are searching for. It should be user friendly and should visitors where to go, where to stay, what to do and how to get there. The best way to quickly draw a tourist attention is to have clear categories. Tamil Nadu tourism provides a lot of information for tourist on home page which results in lot of clutter and confusion. It is not easy to get around and find information easily on the website. The website provides information in bilingual languages. The pages do not load quickly on the website.

Responsiveness: Responsiveness dimension involves convenient options for cancelling the product booked. Tamil Nadu tourism website provides convenient options with the cancellation bookings. They have laid down the cancellation policy. Interaction and function helps the visitors to interact with the information that has been placed on the website. This is possible through online chats available on the website. Any information and queries the tourist have the answers should be immediately available. This feature is missing in Tamil Nadu tourism website. Calendars are provided through links with online bookings which helps the visitors to plan the events and their travel.

Access/contact: The email address, phone number of the contact personnel is available on the website. But the facility on online chat is not available. Any queries the tourist want should be immediately answered.

Findings

On the basis of past studies few dimensions of E-Service Quality have been identified. With the growing role of websites as customer contact point and virtual company office tourism businesses are realizing the strategic importance of a website as a tool for addressing consumers in electronic market space. E-SQ is what differentiates a good quality website and brings the company and customer together. Tamil Nadu tourism provides wide range of information on its website but does not provide information about visa requirements. The

choice of language is limited to English and local language. It seems that agencies responsible for tourism promotion are not targeting people speaking language other than above language. The websites must mention the tourist season to help the visitor plan the trip accordingly. The website should compulsorily provide information safety and security as well information on health and hygiene. The state has designed its website in an impressive way by uploading picture gallery and videos but too much advertised has been done which defeats its basic objective.

Conclusions

Marketing destinations online has become the major focus area all over world. Tourism in today's world is no more a luxury. This has been possible by technological developments in transportation and information technology. It is an aid for both the tourist – for planning and finishing a successful satisfactory tour, as well as for the e-tourism companies for attracting more and more tourists thereby generating more tourism business. Well-designed sites with useful and relevant information can surely help realize a significant level of tourist business by satisfying tourist in effective manner.

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