TripAdvisor.com vs. NYCGO.com: Evaluation of Functional Components of Generalist and Specialist Tourism Websites

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Abstract

While tourism websites are becoming increasingly pervasive, there is a lack of empirical research that captures and documents the quality of different types of tourism websites. In this regard, this study compares the effectiveness of generalist and specialist tourism websites in terms of the functional components they employ to communicate travel information. The findings of the study suggest that there indeed exist variations in the functional features adopted by websites to communicate travel information between generalist and specialist tourism websites, and the differences fundamentally come from the scale and technical assets of the websites. The findings provide valuable illustration of the characteristics and limitations generalist and specialist online media can typically possess. In addition, there are implications for tourism information providers and tourism website users in terms of better system design and more effective travel planning.

Keywords: tourism websites; TripAdvisor; destination marketing; generalist vs. specialist media

1 Introduction

How do people get travel information when they plan a trip somewhere? Nowadays most people browse tourism websites that provide information regarding their potential destinations. The Internet enables tourists to access reliable and accurate information as well as to undertake reservations in a fraction of time, cost, and inconvenience required by conventional methods (O’Connor & Murphy, 2004). Therefore, increasing numbers of people are using the Internet for travel information search, and many Internet websites provide more in-depth materials and richer content compared with conventional promotional agents (Govers & Go, 2003).

As a result, tourism websites are gradually replacing the role played by traditional paper-based travel guide, and there exist overwhelming numbers of tourism websites on the Web. Now, the key is not to get access to many different tourism websites, but to discern tourism websites which can provide better support for travel planning. However, while tourism websites are becoming increasingly important, there is a lack of empirical research to describe and explain differences in quality and effectiveness of tourism websites. Therefore, this study aims at investigating the effectiveness of tourism websites through the lens of specialist vs. generalist online media.
When travellers search for travel information, they tend to browse through multiple websites. These websites fall into two categories: the websites that host information on multiple destinations and require a user to specifically search for a particular destination (i.e. generalist website such as TripAdvisor.com), and those websites that are dedicated to information on one very specific destination (i.e. specialist website, such as NYCgo.com). Choosing between the two is the typical decision tourists make when they search for travel information, yet the comparison between the effectiveness of generalist and specialist websites has been somewhat ignored.

This paper tries to examine the effectiveness of specialist and generalist tourism websites with emphasis on their characteristics as online information source. On one hand, tourism websites are electronic versions of paper-based travel guides, but on the other, the range and format of information communicated through tourism websites greatly differ from the information delivered by their traditional counterpart. As for online media, we assume that the quality of information and the overall effectiveness of tourism websites are largely influenced by the website features they adopt to communicate travel information. For example, there are many travel websites which employ user review functions. By adopting the feature, the websites are enabling communication among the users and provide a wider range of travel information from multiple perspectives. In this regard, we aim to compare the effectiveness of generalist and specialist tourism websites in terms of functional components employed by them. Further, we try to document the current trends in tourism website design, and provide better knowledge on quality of tourism websites to potential travellers. We believe the results can also provide valuable implications regarding characteristics and limitation of overall specialist and generalist online media.

2 Specialist Media vs. Generalist Media

Specialization of media content has shown an upward trend ever since the advent of cable television in the United States. In many cases, the word specialization implies notion of expertise in the specific domain, and similarly, media users may now expect specialization in content beyond television channels as it affords powerful psychological connotations regarding excellence in quality of content offerings (Koh & Sundar, 2007; Koh & Sundar, 2010). Researchers have previously demonstrated the relationship between specialist and generalist television sets and the viewer’s perception of the content provided by this medium (Nass, Steuer, Henriksen, & Dryer, 1996). There was also a study on the effects of specialization in web agents on viewers’ perceptions of the information delivered by the media (Koh & Sundar, 2010).

However, most researches focused on how receivers perceive information from specialist and generalist media differently, and no claims have been made about the actual effectiveness of specialist websites versus generalist websites. Therefore, the goal of this research is to evaluate actual quality of specialist and generalist tourism websites by investigating the functional components they are adopting to communicate travel information.