

**Motivations for Visiting Hotel Websites:
Chinese versus International Consumers¹**

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Abstract

The online travel industry has attracted great interest from academics and practitioners, with the hospitality industry being identified as one of the most popular research topics in the field. Many researchers have evaluated websites and considered ways of improving their quality. However, limited research has considered the cultural aspect of a website's performance. Chinese consumers, in particular, have not received sufficient attention, and most published articles are focused on the Western context. This study uses qualitative methods to investigate the perceptions of Chinese users' on hotel websites, and to identify their requirements for using those websites. Chinese consumers require six unique factors: employment/internal staff list with photos, message board/bulletin board service, one-to-one online services, celebrity stays recorded, unique design of the website's logo, and a Chinese version of a hotel website. The perceptions and requirements of international users were also considered and compared to those of their Chinese counterparts. The findings also revealed differences in preferences between Chinese and international website users.

Keywords: Hotel website, China, Chinese consumer, Perceptions, Motivation

Introduction

The Internet provides a new direction for the travel industry by connecting suppliers and consumers directly without time constraints or regional boundaries. Since the 1990s, the online travel market has grown rapidly and has become a popular area of academic research. Leung and Law (2006) found that from 1985 to 2004, networking was the most popular research area in information technology publications in leading tourism journals. Law, Qi, and Buhalis (2010) further indicated that until 2009, hospitality websites were the most investigated research area in tourism evaluation studies. Thus, as a major component of tourism, the online hotel industry has become increasingly important in the investigation of the online travel business (Hawela, Boyle, & Murray, 2007; O'Connor, 2007). Studies have found that online consumers look for

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comprehensive information and a user-friendly interface (Perdue, 2001; Pons, 2006). In addition, online satisfaction is influenced by consumers' perceptions of online convenience, product information, site design, and financial security (Szymanski & Hise, 2000). To establish hotel websites that meet customer expectations, designers should endeavor to understand users' communication behavior and perceive their attitudes and intentions toward hotel websites. This would enable designers to improve the quality of the websites they are designing.

As part of the world's fastest growing economy, China's tourism industry has been experiencing rapid growth since 1978 when the "Open Door" policy was adopted (Pine & Philips, 2005). In 2010, the number of international overnight visitors to China was 65.5 million, representing an increase of 5.5% compared to 2009. The total industry income amounted to RMB750 billion (USD1 = RMB6.857) in 2010, representing a 19% increase from figures recorded in 2008 (CNTA, 2010). A report produced by the China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC, 2010) showed that by the end of June 2010, the number of Internet users in China reached 420 million, representing an annual growth rate of 2.9%. Furthermore, online travel reservations increased by 19.4% (CNNIC, 2010). With China's large population and huge market potential, understanding the needs of Chinese consumers in the context of its online travel industry is of paramount importance.

This study uses qualitative methods to investigate the perceptions of Chinese and international users on hotel websites. The main objective of this study is to define the unique requirements and expectations of Chinese users and to help practitioners secure more online reservations and expand their business into the China market. Chinese users' expectations on hotel websites and their discussion results were introduced to and discussed by international consumers to seek applicability in the international context.

The remainder of this paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 provides a review of the related literature. Section 3 describes the methodology used in this study, section 4 presents the findings, and section 5 provides a discussion of our results. Section 6 outlines this study's limitations and provides suggestions for future research.

Literature Review

Many published articles have presented various approaches to determine the factors that influence online service quality, consumers' perceptions of websites, and the decision-making process in online travel business transactions (Burgess, Sellitto, & Wenn, 2005; Jeong, 2002). Murphy, Forrest, Wotring, and Brymer (1996) conducted one of the earliest studies to focus on finding measurements of hotel websites. They identified six website success factors: home page, search-engine results, classification, basic functions, communication functions, and audience. Baloglu and Pekcan (2006) determined the design characteristics of Turkish hotel websites; Zafiroopoulos and Vrana (2006) adopted a hierarchical cluster analysis to evaluate hotel websites in Greece; and Buhalis and Spada (2000) analyzed the needs and wants of stakeholders in destination websites by integrating qualitative and quantitative methods. Also, Wong and Law (2005) analyzed Hong Kong travelers' intention to purchase on hotel websites.

Although prior studies have achieved their research objectives successfully, there is no standardized checklist to measure the performance of a hotel website (Law, 2007). Qi, Ip, and Law (2010) proposed a travel-related website performance framework that includes the following parameters: usefulness, service quality, and physical accessibility.

The quality of a website's service performance and physical accessibility largely depends on consumers' satisfaction, which cannot be controlled by a website designer. In contrast, usefulness is the technical aspect of a website that designers can easily manipulate and modify (Qi et al., 2010). Identifying consumers' requirements and expectations will help hoteliers develop and improve their websites.

Lu and Yeung (1998) proposed a website usefulness framework comprised of functionality and usability, which were further categorized as website design and content performance. Ip, Law, and Lee (2010) reviewed website evaluation studies in the tourism and hospitality fields from 1996 to 2009, and emphasized the importance of website usability and functionality. Au Yeung and Law (2003) presented a website usability performance list, whereas Chung and Law (2003) developed indicators for measuring the functionality of hotel websites. However, the measurements used in these two studies were modified attributes from research works on website evaluation conducted in the West. The present research thus attempts to extend website usefulness attributes by identifying the motivations and requirements of both Chinese and international consumers.

A website's usability has a direct impact on its performance and the satisfaction of its users. Nielsen and Norman (2000) found that most people leave a website immediately when they find it difficult to navigate. Au Yeung and Law (2003) have shown that a website's usability largely depends on its design. They also identified five dimensions of usability: (i) language, which means how a website presents its message in text; (ii) layout and graphics, which involve the arrangement of a website's features; (iii) information architecture, which pertains to the structure of a website's information; (iv) user interface and navigation, which refer to how easily can consumers explore a website's different pages; and (v) the general that was related to the overall performance of a website. Additionally, consumers perceive that the quality of information on products and services as the most crucial factor that affects the online decision-making process (Jeong & Lambert, 2001). Kline, Morrison, and John (2004) stated that the purpose of presenting hotel products online is to engage with consumers directly, as product-related information is very important for consumers when making purchase decisions (Jeong & Lambert, 2001; Schmidt, Cantalops, & Santos, 2008). Chung and Law (2003) defined website functionality as the effectiveness of its content, which has five attributes: (i) presentation of a hotel's facilities; (ii) availability of contact information; (iii) feature on how to make reservations; (iv) information on the hotel's vicinity; and (v) management of websites included how the website is being managed. The definition and dimensions of usability and functionality in Au Yeung and Law's (2003) and Chung and Law's (2003) studies will be used to guide this research in exploring consumers' perspectives on using hotel website.

Most research on the online travel market has been limited to the Western context (Kim, Ma, & Kim, 2006). The measurements or frameworks on determining website service quality or performance were primarily derived from Western perspectives, and the applicability of these findings in the Chinese context is uncertain. Yet, research has demonstrated that most Chinese users are dissatisfied with China-based travel websites (Hu, Cheung, & Law, 2008). Lu, Lu, and Zhang (2002) evaluated the service quality and efficiency of Chinese travel-related websites and found that these websites need improvement. Hence, Chinese travel-related websites should improve their quality to satisfy their customers. Bai, Law, and Wan (2008) stated the website service quality, functionality, and usability influence Chinese online consumers' satisfaction and

purchase intention. Rong, Li, and Law (2009) found that Western and Asian users have different perceptions of hotel websites. Law, Bai, and Leung's (2009) findings support this statement and they identified significant differences between the requirements of Chinese and American users for website functionality, usability, and service quality. Rong, Li, and Law (2009) quantitatively compared the differences between Asian and Western users. They investigated the perceptions of Asian and Western users of a set of adopted hotel website functionality attributes. Given that these studies represent the extent of the current research, the literature has so far failed to establish why Chinese users visit hotel websites in the first place, their expectations on website performance, and their hotel website requirements. To fill these research gaps, this study adopts a qualitative method to investigate China's online travel market, and examines the needs and motivations of Chinese users who visit hotel websites.

Methodology

This research adopted the focus group discussion method, which is defined as an in-depth group interview with people from similar backgrounds (Hughes & DuMont, 1993). This method allows an opportunity for a flexible discussion on a specific research topic provided by the researcher. The literature indicates that consumers' perceptions of travel-related websites have been widely studied in the Western context. However, it is unclear whether these findings are applicable to Chinese users. Hence, this study uses the focus group discussion method to determine Chinese users' perceptions, motivations, and requirements for visiting hotel websites. International users were also invited to review the website attributes identified by their Chinese counterparts and to evaluate the suitability of those attributes in the international context. The groups were organized in different sections, and each section includes one group that was held by one of the researchers.

Focus Group Discussions

All Chinese participants were postgraduate students from mainland China who have purchased travel-related products or services online in the past 12 months. The Chinese group discussions took place from November 2008 to February 2009 and the average discussion time was 50 minutes. The discussion was audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. During discussions, three research questions were asked. The first question was introduced at the beginning of the discussion, and the second question was asked when the participants did not have much to talk about the first one. The third question was announced under a similar situation.

- a. What are the motivations of Chinese users visiting hotel websites?
- b. What information Chinese users expect when they visit a hotel website?
- c. How can hotel websites be improved to meet the needs of Chinese users?

To identify new attributes, a usability and functionality list compiled by prior studies (Au Yeung & Law, 2003; Chung & Law, 2003) was used as a reference during the discussion.

The participants in the international focus groups also had experience in searching for information or purchasing travel-related products or services online in the past 12 months. Group discussions for international users took place in May 2009 during an international conference and the average discussion time was 45 minutes. The

discussions were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. During the discussions, the following questions were asked.

- a. What are the motivations of visiting hotel websites?
- b. What kind of features or services do you think a hotel website should provide?
- c. Do you think the attributes collected from Chinese users are suitable for hotel websites? (The purpose of this question is to understand the applicability of these attributes in a Western context.)

A purposive sampling method was adopted, and one group was composed of three to four participants. The researchers were free to split these groups into smaller ones (two to three participants) if they required participants to be more involved in the topic, if the topic was considered controversial, if a more detailed discussion was required, or if participants had experience in, and knowledge of, the topic (Morgan, 1997). The findings were analyzed using an inductive-oriented approach (Lincoln & Guba, 1986) and the qualitative data were analyzed using three steps. First, audiotapes and transcripts collected from the focus group discussions were coded according to the group number and participants' names. The discussions were summarized into categories and themes based on the research objectives to identify the concepts that emerged from the data. Second, the summarized information was presented in an organized format. Third, the organized discussion results were compared to Au Yeung and Law's (2003) and Chung and Law's (2003) studies to split and define newly found factors. Conclusions were drawn based on inductive reasoning (Lincoln & Guba, 1986; Miles & Huberman, 1994). The entire interview process of the focus group discussions was audio recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed in a systematic and iterative way, which is widely recommended by the qualitative research literature (Turner, 1981).

Findings

Five Chinese and three international groups participated in this study. The profile (group number, number of participants in each group, gender, and countries of origin) of the participants is presented in Table 1. A section was considered complete if no new ideas emerged after an hour-long discussion in each group. Chinese group discussions were conducted in Chinese and international group discussions in English. The group discussion results were coded and reviewed by a researcher to identify common comments and unique ideas from the participants.

Table 1: Profile of the Participants in the Discussion Groups

Group number	Number of participants	Gender	Country of origin
Profile of the Chinese discussion groups			
Group 1	3	One male and two females	Mainland China
Group 2	3	One male and two females	Mainland China
Group 3	2	One male and one female	Mainland China
Group 4	4	One male and three females	Mainland China
Group 5	4	Four males	Mainland China
Profile of international discussion groups			
Group 1	2	Two males	Germany and the Netherlands
Group 2	4	Two males and two females	Malaysia
Group 3	4	Three males and one female	Mexico and the USA

Findings and Discussion of the Chinese Discussion Groups

Thirteen of the 16 Chinese participants have visited hotel websites in the past, with the common motivations of “room reservation” and “hotel information searching”. The convenience of collecting sufficient information without time and geographical limitations was cited as an advantage. The study found that users have different perspectives on searching for hotel information on websites. In one case, a participant planning to book a hotel room on a travel website said that he might visit the hotel’s official website for detailed information and compare the rate offered by the hotel website with the one offered by intermediary websites. In another case, if the hotel was a historical building or a well-known landmark, a participant said that customers, especially tourists, may browse other websites and compare corresponding information.

As mentioned previously, searching for hotel information was cited as one of the main reasons Chinese consumers visit a hotel website. Based on the discussion results of the five focus groups, the requirements for a high-quality hotel website information were summarized from a Chinese user perspective. All participants searched for “location and transportation information” on hotel websites. Thus, hotels need to provide clear and accurate electronic maps indicating the direction where airports and train stations are located. In addition, 50% of the participants wanted to familiarize themselves with the hotel’s surroundings before their arrival and wanted to be able to source transportation information from a hotel website. Thirteen of the 16 participants thought that “facility information” was an important feature of hotel websites and preferred that the information includes photographs of the facilities. However, two of the 16 participants indicated that photographs on hotel websites may not all be trustworthy and may have been enhanced using photo-editing software. Ten of the 16 participants were interested in “special offers or promotion information”. Most participants agreed that “multimedia information” would improve the quality of a hotel website as long as any multimedia design features function well. However, only two participants from two different focus groups showed an interest in innovative

multimedia, such as three-dimensional picture tours of hotel rooms, short videos of a hotel's overall facilities, and interactive hotel orientation tours conducted by a cartoon staff character.

"Reservation information" was cited as another main reason Chinese consumers visit a hotel website. However, only five of the 16 participants stated that an "online reservation system" was important to them. All participants indicated that "price" was the most important factor in hotel selection and cited that they would book a hotel room online if it is reasonably priced and convenient. However, if it did not cost too much, telephone reservations still worked for some of the participants. Three participants did not trust the prices shown on hotel websites and stated that they would visit intermediary websites to compare prices before making their final decision on room booking.

New Perceptions of Hotel Websites from Chinese Consumers

In addition to the information commonly expected from hotel websites, the study found a number of new preferences for Chinese consumers.

Employment/internal staff list with photos Two of the 16 participants indicated their willingness to look at this information if they had enough time, and expressed an interest in knowing more about a hotel through its recruiting requirements. One participant suggested that the recruiting requirements may reflect the quality of the hotel staff. Thus, browsing the hotel's "job offer" page could be a useful point of reference for detecting service quality. However, a number of participants disagreed with this view. Two participants stated that they would never spend time looking at this kind of information during their visit to a hotel website.

Message board/bulletin board service Some Chinese hotel websites feature message boards or bulletin boards for guests to leave comments about their stay. The participants' view of this function was mixed, with five of the participants liked this idea very much and indicated that previous guests' comments would influence their own decision of whether to book a room. However, the majority of participants did not trust these messages because any unfavorable comments could be deleted by the hotel.

Online service Five participants recommended that web phone and instant messaging functions should be included on hotel websites, which were already used by some intermediary agents on their websites. Preference was shown for personalized service that may minimize any instance of struggling for information on a website. A web phone and instant messaging facility costs less, allowing consumers to communicate directly with hotel staff. Through this function, users could get more of an idea of the quality of the hotel's services before making a booking.

Chinese version of a hotel website Although most China-based hotel websites have a Chinese-language version, some high-end hotels that mainly cater to foreign guests only offer foreign-language versions of their websites. Nine participants, however, assumed that all Chinese hotel websites would offer a Chinese version. Only a quarter of the participants showed their understanding of English-only websites. One participant commented that if most of the hotel guests were foreigners, a Chinese version would not be necessary and that English was the most commonly used language. However, international hotels could attract more Chinese guests by providing a Chinese version of their website.

Unique design of a website's logo Two groups mentioned and discussed the importance of a hotel's logo design. One participant suggested that the uniqueness of a hotel logo could help promote brand recognition, allowing consumers to recall the hotel. Another participant pointed out that hotel logo design implied how serious the business is, as a unique and well-designed logo expresses willingness to provide an unforgettable first impression and a high standard of service.

Celebrity stays record Two participants expressed their interest in a hotel's record of celebrity visits. For instance, if a president of a country or a famous movie star previously stayed in a hotel, it promotes a good impression and suggests high quality, thus prompting promotion through word-of-mouth.

Findings of International Group Discussion

Ten participants stated that they had used the Internet to search for hotel information. "Price" and "hotel location" were the major items that they searched for. Five participants indicated that hotel features and photos of hotel rooms were the most important reasons for them to use the Internet.

The international users stated that hotel websites should include information on location and transportation. This includes a detailed information on how to reach the hotel, a destination map and local transportation information. Six of the ten participants also mentioned that hotel websites should provide information on the hotel's vicinity. In addition, two participants stated that information on local attractions and weather conditions should also be provided, with one participant suggesting that if a hotel website cannot provide this information, it should at least provide related links, which would save time for consumers. Nine participants agreed that a hotel website should provide "hotel facility information," including photos, room availability, and service explanations. Two participants requested hotel restaurant information, and two female participants commented on the importance of spa information. All participants stated that price was very important when checking and comparing information with other hotels. Four participants emphasized that a hotel should provide photos of its facilities and state its rates clearly for different services and facilities. However, one participant stated that the most important feature of a hotel website is not price information but room availability. If a room is not available, all the search effort would be wasted. Finally, seven of the ten participants preferred hotel websites with a simple and clean structure. The participants indicated that a hotel website should not require "too many clicks". They requested a simple, easy-to-use, and qualified hotel website. A clean and effective website implies that the company cares about its website, assigning a strong team to manage it. One participant argued that, though maintaining simplicity was a good idea, usability functions were also extremely important. Another participant provided additional comments by stating that a simple website structure was as important as friendliness. A website's ease-of-use certainly gives consumers a good impression of the hotel.

International Users' Perceptions on the Attributes Collected from Chinese Consumers

The international participants were also asked to provide their comments on the six new attributes collected from their Chinese counterparts. This section presents

information gathered based on international online consumers' discussions of these attributes.

New employment/internal staff list with photos The international participants stated that this is not an essential attribute and argued that the quality of a hotel's service and the competence of its staff should instead be presented by a hotel brand and star rating. However, they stated that it is good to know who would serve at the hotel. Thus, this attribute was modified as a "staff directory search function" and was added to the functionality list to match the requirements of both Chinese and international consumers.

Message board/bulletin board service The international participants' comments on the "message board/bulletin board service" were compared to those of their Chinese counterparts. According to the participants, this is a satisfactory feature as online contact helps consumers share their experiences. However, a hotel may consider putting a link to a third-party website or bulletin board service to enhance its objectivity; otherwise, not many consumers will trust the information provided by a hotel as it may be biased. Evidently, both international and Chinese consumers showed interest in online recommendations and are predisposed to trusting third-party websites. Thus, this attribute was included in the functionality list.

One-to-one online services The participants in the international group considered "one-to-one online service" as time wasting. If customers cannot find information from a website, they are likely to leave, which defeats the purpose of having a website in the first place. A participant in Group 1 argued that if a hotel website can effectively answer consumers' questions, then it is a very helpful tool. Otherwise, it indicates bad service quality, which will give consumers a bad impression. To balance the requirements of the Chinese and the international participants, the "one-to-one online services" attribute was modified as an example of the functionality attribute of "hotel response to customer requirements (online one-to-one service, call back function, or online feedback form)".

Celebrity's stay record The participants in Group 2 thought this is a strange point; however, if a famous person had stayed at a hotel, then they might be influenced to give it a try. The participants in Group 3 stated that this signifies that the hotel is fancy and, hence, unaffordable. However, the participants in Group 1 did not support this opinion and considered guest information private and that it should be protected by the hotel. They also stated that a "celebrity stay record" would not affect their original decision. This attribute was then dropped from the list because it did not make sense to international consumers.

Unique design of a website's logo All participants liked this attribute. They stated that a hotel should have a well-designed logo, and its benefits go beyond website promotion. If a hotel intends to extend its business, a unique and distinguishing logo is required. The participants believe that a unique logo would help them recall the hotel regardless of the quality of their stay. Although this proved to be a very useful attribute, the participants in one of the groups emphasized that hotel facilities, price, and functions are more important. Hence, this was kept as a usability attribute as it indicates website design performance.

Chinese version of a hotel website "Yes, the Chinese should care more about the Chinese," said one participant. This statement was met with agreement among all groups. According to the participants, hotels should keep versions of their websites in both English and a commonly used language. To attract the attention of consumers worldwide, this attribute was modified into "multiple language versions of website" under the usability list.

Discussion and Conclusions

Previous research has shown Chinese consumers' preferences of hotel websites (Law, Ho, & Cheung, 2004; Law & Cheung, 2008; Ma, Law, & Ye, 2008). This research is the first attempt to investigate using a qualitative research method Chinese consumers' motivation and requirements on hotel websites.

This research has investigated the perceptions of Chinese and international users of hotel websites in terms of usefulness (Table 2). Three aspects were investigated: "why search online hotel information?", "common requirements of hotel websites", and "about the newly found attributes". The findings demonstrate that Chinese and international consumers differ in their perceptions and that the majority of them search for hotel information on the Internet. Additionally, international and Chinese consumers have different motivations for visiting hotel websites. In particular, international consumers pay more attention to hotel location and price information, whereas Chinese consumers care more about room reservation information. This finding was supported by Law and Cheung's (2008) study, which investigated websites representing hotels in Hong Kong, Shanghai, and Beijing.

When the requirements of the Chinese and international consumers on hotel website were compared, the findings revealed that the former prefer a hotel website that provides hotel facility information with photos, price, promotion, and reservation and destination-related information. In contrast, international consumers look for a clean, well-structured hotel website that features price, hotel facility, and destination-related information. This finding implies that Chinese and international users expect similar information from hotel websites. However, in line with Bai, Law, and Wan's (2008) findings, information presented via multimedia appeared to be more important to Chinese consumers. A website's ease-of-use is more important for international consumers. Kim and Stoel (2004) stated that a simple, user-friendly, and organized structure means successful website interface design. Therefore, hotel website designers should present information to Chinese and international consumers in different language versions of the website.

The attributes "staff directory search function", "hotel response to customer requirement (online one-to-one service, call back function, or online feedback form)" and "online forum (bulletin board service or providing a link to third-party websites)" can be added into the functionality dimension. Meanwhile, the attributes "multiple language versions of website" and "unique logo" are recognized usability attributes.

Table 2: International and Chinese Participants' Perceptions of Using Hotel Websites

	Chinese	International
Why search online for hotel information?	Room reservation and hotel information search	Hotel information, price, and hotel location
Common requirements for hotel websites	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Facilities and photos - Price - Reservation system - Location and transportation - Hotel's surrounding environment and attractions - Promotion information - Multimedia information 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Simple, clean structure - Location and transportation - Hotel facility information and room availability - Price - Surrounding information/destination information
Newly found attributes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Employment/internal staff list with photos - Message board/bulletin board service - One-to-one online services - Celebrity's stay recorded - Unique design of a website's logo - Chinese version of a hotel website 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Staff directory search function - Hotel response to customer requirement (online one-to-one service, call back function, or online feedback form) - Multiple language versions of website - Online forum (bulletin board service or providing a link to a third-party websites) - Unique logo

The international consumers commented on the newly discovered attributes. Five new attributes match the requirements of both the Chinese and international consumers: “staff directory search function”, “hotel response to customer requirements (online one-to-one service, call back function or online feedback form)”, “multiple language versions of a website”, “online forum (bulletin board service or providing a link to third-party websites)”, and “unique logo”. This research primarily proved the website usefulness framework in hotel website by combining functionality and usability. These new attributes extend functionality and usability, and are applicable to both the international and Chinese contexts. These can also be used by researchers in other related studies, such as establishing a new website usefulness framework, perceiving consumers’ satisfaction on hotel website, and evaluating hotel websites’ usefulness performance. Hotel web designers may consider integrating these attributes into their website redesign.

Despite its useful findings, this study is limited by the scope of its investigation and, thus, the results cannot be generalized. Nevertheless, the findings provide a new direction relating to Chinese consumers’ requirements for hotel websites. To further

understand Chinese online consumers, future studies should recruit more participants from across a wider region and employ a quantitative method to analyze research findings.

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