

PROCEEDING

Sustainable Tourism: Building Resilience in Uncertain Time

February 3rd-4th, 2021

Kasetsart University
Bangkok, Thailand



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WP5 – NETWORK FOR NATIONAL AND CROSS- COUNTRY EXCHANGE



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TOURIST: Competence Centres for the Development of Sustainable Tourism and Innovative Financial Management Strategies to increase the positive impact of local tourism in Thailand and Vietnam

TOURIST Consortium: FH JOANNEUM Gesellschaft mbH (Austria), Universidad de Alicante (Spain), Haaga-Helia University of Applied Sciences (Finland), Hue University (Vietnam), University of Social Sciences and Humanities Hanoi (Vietnam), University of Social Sciences and Humanities Ho Chi Minh City (Vietnam), Kasetsart University (Thailand), Burapha University (Thailand), Payap University (Thailand), Prince of Songkla University (Thailand), The Thailand Community Based Tourism Institute (Thailand).



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AN EVALUATION OF WEBSITE USAGE IN ECOTOURISM BUSINESS IN THAILAND

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ABSTRACT

Recent development in information technology (IT), in particular the progress of the Internet, has changed the way that tourism businesses communicated with their customers. Today, most tourism businesses have widely utilized the Internet (e.g. websites) to sell their products and services. However, in case of ecotourism business, no empirical studies have investigated on how ecotourism businesses have developed and utilized the benefits of websites to promote and sell their products. Therefore, this study has an objective to evaluate the use of websites from ecotourism business in Thailand by employing the extended Model of Internet Commerce Adoption (eMICA) consisting of 3 levels. Subjects being investigated were 71 travel business members listed on the website of the Thai Ecotourism and Adventure Travel Association (TEATA). Descriptive statistics were used to analyze the data in terms of frequency and percentage. The results showed that many travel businesses did not utilize the websites to its full potential, particularly for the marketing purposes and online transaction. Recommendations are provided for travel businesses to fully develop the use of the websites more effectively.

Keywords: ecotourism business, Internet, website, online marketing

INTRODUCTION

The rapid development of the Internet is having a huge impact on the tourism industry (Kerr, Tsoi, & Burgess, 2009; Sangpikul, 2019). During the past decade, the Internet has been increasingly important and represented a significant opportunity for businesses to distribute their products and services directly to consumers (Dollin, Burgess, & Cooper, 2002; Kotler et al., 2006; Sangpikul, 2019). The information-based resource, ease of use, interactivity and flexibility of the Internet are appealing to travel and tourism industry (Dollin et al., 2002; Kaur, 2017). The prevalence of information available through the Internet has raised the possibility of marketing tourism products worldwide (Sangpikul, 2019). The Internet has been recognized as a useful sales outlet as it provides a medium for communication between a company and its customers (Inkpen, 1998; Kotler et al., 2006; American Marketing Association). The literature indicates that tourism is the most likely industry to generate revenues and sales through internet-based commerce (e.g. websites), and as a result, tourism businesses are actively engaging in online marketing and sales (Donohoe & Needham, 2008; Sangpikul, 2019). In case of ecotourism, despite the advance of Internet technology has contributed to the growing impacts of online marketing of tourism industry, studies to understand Internet-based ecotourism business is still limited.

A review of literature indicates that previous studies regarding ecotourism business are primarily dominated by Western perspective, researchers are yet to explore on the other side of the world like the Asian setting. Understanding global ecotourism business should contribute to the future development of the industry. In light of the increasing significance of the Internet marketing and limited literature in ecotourism business in Asian context, this study thus aims

to evaluate the use of website and e-commerce adoption among ecotourism businesses in Thailand by employing the extended Model of Internet Commerce Adoption (eMICA). Understanding ecotourism businesses and how their products are marketed through the Internet (websites) would help enhance the chance of business success. Successful ecotourism business makes for a stronger ecotourism sector, which will help host communities obtain greater benefits from ecotourism (Donohoe & Needham, 2008; Sirakaya, 1997). The results of the study will contribute to the existing ecotourism literature and broaden an understanding of the Internet-based ecotourism marketing, particularly on the Asian context. Moreover, the finding will provide useful suggestions for Thai ecotourism businesses to develop effective websites for their online marketing.

OBJECTIVES

1. To study the potential, particularly for the marketing purposes and online transaction on travel companies who are members of the Thai Ecotourism and Adventure Travel Association (TEATA).
2. To evaluate the use of website usage of ecotourism business in Thailand by employee in the extended Model of Internet Commerce Adoption (eMICA).

LITERATURE REVIEW

During the past decade, there is an abundance of research examining or evaluating the Internet or websites of tourism businesses such as hotels, travel agencies, and airlines. However, only a few studies have examined the Internet marketing of ecotourism businesses.

Among them, Lai and Shafer (2005) explored the Internet-based ecotourism marketing of ecolodges in Latin America and the Caribbean by examining the ecolodges listed on the website of the International Ecotourism Society. The study revealed that the sampled ecolodges provided a variety of ecotourism products to meet the diverse interests of ecotourist market. However, their online marketing messages provided on the websites were only partially aligned with ecotourism principles. The study suggested on developing social marketing and ecolabelling for online ecotourism marketing to better shape tourist expectations, attitudes and behaviors in ways that support the sustainable practice.

Another study by Donohoe and Needham (2008) assessed the congruency of internet-based ecotourism marketing with ecotourism tenets. By examining Canadian ecotourism providers, the study found the use of the term ecotourism and its tents to market tourism experiences was a well-established internet-based marketing activity, and congruency between ecotourism tenets and ecotourism marketing messages was contentious among the Canadian sample providers. The study focused on developing ecotourism standard to further promote sustainable ecotourism in Canada. In particular, cooperative, voluntary and regulatory initiatives are needed to ensure legitimacy of the industry.

Lathiras et al. (2010) analyzed website quality of the Internet sites in agro-tourism and ecotourism. The study detected some medium quality ratings and some positive evaluations of certain factors. In general, the website of agro-tourism received higher score than that of ecotourism. Major findings concerning the website quality are the lack of interaction facilities and conversations as well as personalized options with user personal accounts. Recommendations are focused on the design, information, interaction and overall quality of a website.

In addition to ecotourism businesses, some scholars explored the Internet marketing of related tourism businesses. For instance, Lee and Morrison (2010) evaluated and compared upscale hotels' websites in South Korea and USA. The study found that there was no significant difference in the overall effectiveness of the upscale hotels' websites in South Korea and the USA. However, the websites of the Korean upscale hotels performed slightly better than their US counterparts. The study concluded that most upscale hotels in both countries were not effectively using websites from the marketing and upscale hotel perspectives.

Tsai, Chou, and Leu (2011) explored web-based marketing of the airline industry in Taiwan. Based on the evaluation of marketing 4P's and website quality, the study found that the Taiwanese airlines did not fully capitalize on the web's marketing potential, and have a great deal of room to improve their websites for the e-marketing strategies in terms of product, price, place, and promotion. The study also suggested the improvement on information, service and system quality.

Panrod and Jaroenwisan, (2012) explored the information technologies implementation in marketing activities of resorts and spa businesses in southern provinces in Thailand. The findings revealed that the three implementation platforms in marketing activities of resorts and spas are e-marketing, social media marketing, and special interest group marketing respectively. For e-marketing, it is most implemented in marketing activities (75% adopted and 25% not adopted). As for social media marketing, it is adopted by only a few properties (29.6% adopted and 70.4% not adopted). Finally, special interest group marketing, there small proportion for resorts and spa businesses (3.5% adopted and 96.5% not adopted).

In sum, although there are several related studies on Internet marketing in the hospitality and tourism businesses, studies examining the ecotourism business sector are limited. In addition, among the existing studies, it seems that the literature on ecotourism business is primarily dominated by the Western perspective. Researchers are yet to explore on the other side of the world such as Asian setting. In particular, scholars point out the limitation of ecotourism business studies in Thai context and encourage more research to learn about this important sector (Sangpikul, 2008). Previous studies, from Western perspective, have revealed that ecotourists use the Internet as a primary means for gathering travel and tour information when planning ecotourism activities (Lai & Shafer, 2005; Donohoe & Needham, 2008). The prevalence of information available through the Internet has raised the possibility of global ecotourism to be more accessible to the market (Lai & Shafer, 2005; Fuchs, 2017). This highlights the importance of the use of the Internet among tourists. Therefore, ecotourism businesses should focus on the full use of the Internet and put more efforts on the online marketing as well as more research is needed regarding this issue.

The Extended Model of Internet Commerce Adoption (eMICA)

This study utilized the extended Model of Internet Commerce Adoption (eMICA) to evaluate the use of websites of ecotourism businesses to determine the website development. The evaluation of website development by using the eMICA will provide a roadmap indicating where a business or industry sector is in its development of Internet commerce applications (Doolin et al., 2002). This will help us understand how Thai ecotourism businesses have developed the Internet commerce for tourism marketing when compared to international context. Burgess and Cooper (2000), who developed the eMICA, explained the idea that commercial website development typically begins simply and evolves over time with the addition of more functionality and complexity as firms gain experience with Internet technologies. Previous studies employed the eMICA model to evaluate the level of website

development of tourism related organizations (e.g. Australian and New Zealand Tourism Organizations) to better understand the functionality used in the websites of the tourism organizations (e.g. Burgess & Cooper, 2000; Doolin et al., 2002). The eMICA model consists of three stages (as shown in Table 1), incorporating three levels of business process: 1) web-based promotion 2) provision of information and services and 3) transaction processing.

Table 1: The Extended Model of Internet Commerce Adoption (eMICA)

Stage of eMICA	Examples of functionality/features
Stage 1: Web-based promotion	
Layer 1 - basic information	Company name, contact address and details, area of business
Layer 2 - rich information	E- mail contact, general information about company and activities
Stage 2: Provision of information and services	
Layer 1 - low interactivity	Basic products, links to further information, online enquiry form
Layer 2 - medium interactivity	Customer support (e.g. FAQs, sitemaps), industry-specific value-added features (e.g. downloadable materials, special offers)
Layer 3 - high interactivity	Chat room, discussion forum, multimedia, newsletters or updates by e- mail, online reservations for accommodation or tours
Stage 3: Transaction processing	Secure online transactions, order status and tracking, interaction with corporate servers

Source: Adopted from Burgess and Cooper (2000)

METHODOLOGY

The subjects in this study were travel companies who are members of the Thai Ecotourism and Adventure Travel Association (TEATA). These travel companies are listed on the website of the TEATA (www.teata.or.th) which is one of the well-known ecotourism websites in Thailand. The website provides general information regarding ecotourism and its related activities. During the survey (December 2019), there was a total of 71 members listed on the website, and all of them were included in the analysis.

This study used the eMICA model developed by Burgess and Cooper (2000) to evaluate the websites of the travel companies listed on the website of TEATA. The model consisted of three stages/levels (as shown in Table 1). Descriptive statistics were used to analyze the data in terms of frequency and percentage.

RESULTS

The studies to categories and types of travel companies that out of 71 travel business members, 17 companies (24%) were full-serviced tour operators offering a variety of travel and tourism products such as sightseeing tours, cultural and heritage tours, and natural tours. Approximately one-thirds (34%) were categorized as nature-based tour operators (24 companies). For the rest (18 companies), 8 companies were resorts and the others were travel related companies such as companies selling outdoor and recreational products, local travel association, travel magazine, and overseas travel agent. However, 3 companies had no websites (not available)

and were excluded from the analysis. Therefore, 68 companies were included in the study. as shown in Table 2

Table 2: Categories and types of travel companies

Categories	Number of companies (%)
Full-service tour operators (i.e. companies selling a variety of travel and tourism products)	17 (24.0%)
Nature-based tour operators	24 (34.0%)
Resorts (e.g. ecolodges)	12 (17.0%)
Travel related companies (i.e. companies selling outdoor and recreational products)	8 (11.0%)
Others (i. e. local travel association, travel magazine, overseas travel agent, and herbal products)	7 (10.0%)
No website	3 (4.0%)
Total	71 (100%)

According to this finding, it should be noted that the TEATA is the ecotourism and adventure tourism association. This suggests that its members may not be restricted to only specialized ecotourism operators. The association welcomes other travel companies who focus on nature-based tourism and those who want to promote responsible tourism (e.g. ecotourism, adventure tourism, and ecolodges). Because of this, the TEATA may have several types of travel business members including full-service tour operators, nature-based tour operators, resorts, and other travel related companies. In Thailand, it is common that many full-service tour operators provide a wide range of travel products to the mass market such as ecotourism, adventure tourism, cultural tourism and sightseeing tours.

Table 3 Evaluating travel businesses' website development

Stage of eMICA and level of functionality	Number of websites (%)
Stage 1 -Web-based promotion Layer 1: basic information (e.g. company general information, address) Layer 2: rich information (e.g. e-mail contact, information about company activities)	0 0
Stage 2 – Provision of information and services Layer 1: low interactivity (e.g. basic product information, links to further information, online enquiry form, news, itineraries, photo gallery) Layer 2: medium interactivity (e.g. customer support, FAQs, sitemap, down loadable materials, special offers, guest book, searchable database of accommodation, tour programs, activities, and site search engine) Layer 3: high interactivity (e.g. online bookings for accommodation, tours, activities, non-secure payment)	28 (42.0%) 22 (32.0%) 11 (16.0%)
Stage 3 – transaction processing (e.g. secure online payment, order status tracking)	7 (10.0%)
Total	68 (100%)

Table 3 presents the evaluation of website development of the travel companies. Each website was evaluated and assigned an appropriate stage and layer in the eMICA model. The results indicates that the majority of the TEATA members have developed their websites in Stage 2, particularly in Layer 1 (42.0%), Layer 2 (32.0%) and Layer 3 (16.0%), respectively. As most websites were developed in Stage 2: Layer 1 (low interactivity), this suggests that these travel companies basically provide general product information, product prices, tour programs and itineraries. They might have some forms of navigation structure such as buttons with links to

different parts of the site as well as provide some information such as travel news, photo gallery, and inquiry form.

DISCUSSION

According to there were only 7 companies (10.0%) that have developed their website capacities to Stage 3 (transaction processing). This is the stage of capability offering secure online credit card payment for travel bookings. Comparing the current result with previous studies (i.e. Burgess & Cooper, 2000; Doolin et al., 2002), it discloses some similarities in that most travel businesses in the tourism industry (local and international levels) have developed their websites into Stage 2 (provision of information and services). However, it should be noted that, though the same stage development, there are major differences in the Internet commerce adoption (i.e. level of website's capability and functionality) between Thai and international travel companies. In the current study (Thai companies), more than half of them categorized in Stage 2: Layer 1 (low interactivity), while most samples in previous studies (i.e. Burgess & Cooper, 2000; Doolin et al., 2002) have advanced their websites into Stage 2: Layer 2 (medium interactivity) and Layer 3 (high interactivity). To stay competitive in the global tourism market, this suggests that the Thai travel businesses should develop and improve their website's capability and functionality to respond to the changes of the technology and to meet customers' needs/expectations.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This study has evaluated the use of the Internet among the travel companies who are the members of the Thai Ecotourism and Adventure Travel Association (TEATA). The study found that the TEATA has various types of travel business members (e.g. full-service tour operators, nature-based tour operators, resorts, and other tourism related businesses). These companies provided a variety of travel and tourism products and services for different target groups. Among 68 companies examined, almost half of them were categorized as nature-based tour operators while the rests were full-service tour operators, resorts and travel related businesses. As the TEATA is a private travel business association with the goals to achieve the philosophy and principles of ecotourism and sustainable tourism as well as to be the leading ecotourism association in the region, there are several suggestions that may help the TEATA and its member companies to develop effective Internet-based marketing and stay competitive in the global market.

According to the finding (Table 3), it appears that most Thai travel businesses' websites display a slightly lower level of website's functionality and interactivity when compared to other Western studies (Burgess & Cooper, 2000; Doolin et al. 2002). Although those previous studies were conducted several years ago, the website development of those samples showed moderate to high levels of websites' features; indicating a relatively advanced stage of adoption of Internet commerce when compared to Thailand case. Today, the Internet is increasingly important role in marketing and promoting tourism products, particularly ecotourism (Lai & Shafer, 2005; Kaur, 2017). Travel businesses could gain competitive advantages from using the Internet as a means of direct distribution and communication to their customers who mainly search information online (Boonthai & Assenov, 2006; Sangpikul, 2019). The result from this study (Table 3) as well as the concept of website development based on eMICA model (Table 1) would provide some ideas for Thai ecotourism businesses to determine their stage of Internet adoption and further develop their websites' functions and features to approach both domestic and international customers. To stay competitive in the online travel market and engage

consumers' interest and participation, it is suggested that Thai travel companies should focus on interaction with customers by consistently developing their website technologies and functionalities over time. They may use the guidelines provided in Table 1 as the way of development/improvement. Effective website development should not only assess the technical quality of the medium but should also include aspects related to customer satisfaction (American Marketing Association, 2019; Wang & Fesenmaier, 2006). Regular evaluating and improving website will help business keep and increase their online presence and competitiveness in the market place to reach the targets (Costas & Vasiliki, 2006; Sangpikul, 2019). Developing effective web-based marketing requires taking full advantages of websites as a marketing medium.

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