A Longitudinal Study of Consumer Perceptions of Travel Websites: The Case of Hong Kong

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Abstract

Knowing how consumers perceive travel websites can help practitioners better understand consumers' online requirements. This paper reports the findings of a longitudinal study that investigated the changes and trends in the profile and behavior of online travel-website users in Hong Kong. The profiles of e-buyers and e-browsers in 2009, when compared with those established by prior studies conducted in 2000 and 2007, point in a new direction for practitioners and researchers investigating online travel-website user behavior. The results indicated that more middle-aged consumers have become online travel-website users, and that website security and price are perceived to be the most important factors for travel-website use by both e-browsers and e-buyers.

Keywords: Internet, travel websites, consumer perceptions, Hong Kong

Introduction

The past decade has witnessed an unprecedented 362.3% growth in Internet use (*Internet World Stats*, 2009). It has now been more than 10 years since online retailing became popular in the late 1990s (Lohse, Bellman, & Johnson, 2000). It still remains largely unknown whether online users have changed. Mills and Law (2004) stated that consumer buying and information-searching behavior have changed dramatically in the Internet era. Apparently, that statement holds true for the e-tourism industry. This paper reports the results of a longitudinal study that examined the profiles and perceptions of e-browsers and e-buyers of travel websites in Hong Kong, a well-developed outbound and inbound tourism region (Zhang, Qu, & Tang, 2004; Qu & Sit, 2007). Significantly, its historical background as a former British colony allows Hong Kong to integrate both Western lifestyles and Chinese traditions (Song, Wong, & Chon, 2003). Thus, the online perceptions of Hong Kong consumers represent both Chinese sensitivities, and consumer characteristics from developed tourism regions.

The Internet connects tourists and suppliers directly and provides tourists a convenient medium without limits on time and location. Ahuja, Gupta, and Raman (2003) stated that online consumers are looking for convenience, selection, lower price, original services, personal attention, easy and abundant information access, and privacy. O'Cass and Fenech (2003) emphasized that even though the numbers of online consumers do not increase as rapidly as many predictions hold, online business investment will still increase. Most tourism practitioners have certainly established websites to promote and sell products, with the online travel market showing enormous potential for growth. However, much more work needs to be done to further understand and develop this medium (O'Cass & Fenech, 2003). The objectives of this study were: a) to examine whether consumers have changed their travel- searching behavior during the past ten years, b) to compare the demographics of offline users, e-buyers, and e-browsers in the past ten years, and c) to indicate the differences in perception of travel websites between e-buyers and e-browsers.

Literature Review

Prior studies have focused on investigating online consumers' perceptions so that practitioners can increase their sales volume and attract new consumers. Buahlis and Law (2008) stated that the key to attracting consumers is satisfying their needs. Law and Wong (2003) as well as Cheung and Law (2009) investigated the perceptions of travel-website success factors among Hong Kong users. Of 952 respondents in 2000, 214 (22.4%) had visited at least one travel website, but only 14 of them (6.5%) had made online purchases (Law & Wong, 2003). The corresponding numbers among the 2,012 respondents in 2007 were 641 (31.9%) and 113 (17.6%), respectively. In addition, Hong Kong users had changed their perceptions of the importance of factors that contribute to the success of travel websites. In 2000, users generally perceived a secure payment method and price as the most important factors (Law & Wong, 2003), but rapid information searching and user-friendly systems were considered to be the most important in 2007 (Cheung & Law, 2009). In other words, over a seven-year period, travel-website users in Hong Kong had shifted their preference from online security and price, to efficiency. Thus, trends in online traveler perceptions can be understood as a valuable indicator of consumers' online purchase ability, requirements, and attention. Although Cheung and Law (2009) compared the differences in Hong Kong online consumers' perceptions over the past seven years, they did not highlight perception trends. What follows is a detailed description of those aspects of consumer perceptions that changed.

As early as 1997, Peterson, Balasubramanian, and Bronnenberg (1997) predicted that transaction security and privacy would become two major barriers to online shopping. Nowadays, many online consumers stop at the online transaction stage because of security and privacy concerns (Lian & Lin, 2008). Similarly, Koo (2006) stated that customers perceive product assortment, information quality, and security as the most important factors when planning to make online purchases. Salisbury, Pearson, and Harrison (1998) found that perceived usefulness and perceived security have a significant relationship. Lu and Yeung (1998) defined website usefulness as comprising website functionality and usability. While functionality refers to website content, usability involves website design or ease of use (Nielsen, 1993). Website content has a direct impact on consumer satisfaction, and the establishment of consumers' trust depends on whether a website has good usability (Roy, Dewit, & Aubert, 200; Law & Hsu, 2005). Lang (2000) found the three most important factors for online booking are Internet security, price range, and user-friendliness. Likewise, Wong and Law (2005) argued that e-consumer purchase decision-making is influenced by website information quality, time, and sensitivity of content.

During the purchase stage, price is one of the major reasons that people buy online (Starkov & Price, 2003). The Internet provides a new shopping environment that offers various product choices from different websites at different prices. Consumers can easily find low prices online in a relatively short time. Many consumers, however, use websites only for information searches and still purchase products offline (Buhalis & Law, 2008). To increase online trust, practitioners should thus consider establishing a secure and reliable environment for their customers. For instance, if a business has a good brand reputation, consumers are more likely to search online for information based on its brand name (Degeratu, Rangaswamy, & Wu, 2000). Beatty and Ferrell (1998) found that familiarity can increase trust. Therefore, brand name (or reputation) can be a factor that affects consumers' online decision-making.

Previous studies have investigated the online purchase decision-making process of consumers, and found that purchase intention can be influenced by website security, privacy, functionality, usability, price of products, and website reputation (Wong & Law, 2005; Reay & Miller, 2009; Hernández, Jiménez, & Martín, 2009; Lian & Lin, 2008). However, most of those studies were cross-sectional and focused on analyzing the attention and behavior of current consumers. Only a few studies have investigated changes in travel-website users and their perceptions. The aims of this study are thus to analyze the changes in the profiles of Hong Kong travel-website users, compare online travel-browsers and -buyers, and identify the trend in changes of online consumer perceptions from 2000 to 2009. Following the prior studies, *e-browsers* are defined as Internet users who have visited at least one travel website in the past two years, and *e-buyers* are Internet users who have purchased from at least one travel website in the past two years. The findings will shed light on the changes in the profile and behavior of travel-website users.

Methodology

In late-March 2009, a large-scale domestic survey of Hong Kong outbound tourism was conducted by telephone interviews. All sampled telephone numbers were generated by a random-digit dialing method. Each potential respondent was contacted three times until the survey could be successfully completed or could not be further answered. A total of 17,837 numbers were dialed for a contact rate of 82.55%, and 1,478 questionnaires were successfully completed, representing a response rate of 8.29%. The questionnaire used in the survey was originally designed in English, and then translated into traditional Chinese using a back-translation process to ensure the accuracy of translation. Due to the limited number of questions in the survey, only three main questions of relevance to this study, drawn from Law and Wong (2003) as well as Cheung and Law's (2009) studies, were included. At the beginning of the questionnaire, a qualifying question asked whether the respondent had visited any websites for travel-related products/services in the past 24 months. Respondents who answered positively were then asked to reply to two questions about whether they had purchased any travel-related products/services from the Internet in the past 24 months. The same respondents were then asked to indicate which three of the five factors had the most effect on their online purchase decisions. These five factors included: 1) payment security, referring to the perceived trustfulness of online transactions, 2) price, referring to the price of online travel-related products, 3) website's reputation, determining how much a brand name may have affected the consumer's purchase, 4) website's usability, referring to the website design and ease of use, and 5) website's functionality, referring to the website content. The respondents could also choose "don't know/not sure" or "refuse to answer." Prior to the survey, the questionnaire was pilot-tested by several Hong Kong residents who were unrelated to the study.

Findings and Discussion

Table 1 shows the demographic profile of the respondents who had, and had not, visited any travel websites.

Table1

Profile of the Respondents in 2009

Variables	Have you visited any travel websites in the past two years?						
	Yes		No				
	Number	%	Number	%	χ^2	df	p
Gender (N=1,455)					5.245	2	0.073
Male	313	54.9%	257	45.1%			
Female	442	49.9%	443	50.1%			
Age (N=1,439)					287.911	10	0.000*
25 or less	130	67.7%	62	32.3%			
26 to 35	184	76.7%	56	23.3%			
36 to 45	219	67.4%	106	32.5%			
46 to 55	141	58.0%	203	83.5%			
56 to 65	55	27.5%	145	72.5%			
66 or above	10	7.6%	121	92.4%			
Education (N=1,455)					188.614	14	0.000*
Less than secondary/high school	165	29.2%	401	70.8%			
Completed secondary/high school	201	53.5%	175	46.5%			
Some college or University	55	63.2%	32	36.8%			
Completed college/University degree/diploma	280	77.1%	83	22.9%			
Completed postgraduate degree	52	91.2%	5	8.8%			
Income (N=1,201)					255.141	8	0.000*
HK$9,999 or less	32	17.3%	153	82.7%			
HK$10,000-HK$19,999	130	45.8%	154	54.2%			
HK$20,000-HK$29,999	128	55.9%	101	44.1%			
HK$30,000-HK$39,999	118	65.9%	61	34.1%			
HK$40,000-HK$49,999	72	67.9%	34	32.1%			
HK$50,000-HK$59,999	43	64.1%	24	35.8%			
HK$60,000-HK$69,999	30	81.0%	7	18.9%			
HK$70,000 or above	90	83.3%	18	16.7%			

Note: * Significant at $p < 0.05$

Among the 1,478 successfully interviewed respondents, 1,455 provided useful responses. Table 1 shows that 755 (51.9%) of them had visited at least one travel website in the past two years; whereas 700 (48.1%) had not. There were more female than male respondents, and most respondents were from 26 to 55 years of age. The majority of them had received education at the degree level or below, and had monthly household incomes of HK$10,000 to HK$39,999 (HK$7.8 = US$1). Chi-square tests showed significant differences between the respondents who had, and had not, visited any travel websites in terms of age, education, and income. In particular, the propensity to become travel-website users increases with decreasing age (younger people are more likely to become users), increasing education level and household income. Such findings are in accordance with those of Christou and Kassianidis (2002).

The demographic data of travel website users in 2000, 2007, and 2009 are displayed in Table 2. Over the whole period there were more female than male users. Although Bonn, Furr, and Susskind (1998) found no gender difference in online travel-information searching, Richard, Chebat, Yang, and Putrevu (2009) discovered that women enjoy information gathering and exploring online more than men. This could explain our findings. In terms of age in 2000, 36% of travel-website users were 26 to 35 years old, which was followed by 28.77% aged from 36 to 45, and 25% aged 25 or less. In 2007 and 2009, the majority of them were 36 to 45 years old, closely followed by 26 to 35. The percentage of travel-website users aged 25 or less decreased by 7.41%, and the corresponding number for 46 to 55 year-old users increased by 12.68% from 2000 and 2009, which indicates that more middle-aged consumers are now attracted to travel websites. At the same time, there has been a fluctuation in education levels: most travel-website users were college educated in 2000 and 2009; but in 2007, the majority had completed only secondary education. The overall results of these three studies indicated that most travel-website users had household incomes between HK$10,000 and HK$49,999 per month. The number of travel-website users slowly decreased as income increased, but the major income level also decreased from HK$20,000 to HK$29,999 in 2000, to HK$10,000 to HK$19,999 in 2009. This could be due to the financial crisis in 2008-2009, which made people more likely to search for and compare information online before booking. In 2009 the profile of travel-website users had stabilized at 26 to 45 years old, with a university degree, and a medium-level of monthly income.

Table 2

Comparison of Travel Websites among Different Years

Study	This study	Cheung & Law (2009)	Law & Wong (2003)
Year of data collection / Total respondents	2009 / n=1,455	2007 / n=2,012	2000 / n=952
	Have you visited any travel websites in the past two years?		
	Yes (51.9%)	Yes (31.9%)	Yes (22.5%)
Gender	n=755	n=641	n=214
Male	313 (41.46%)	263 (41.03%)	102 (47.66%)
Female	442 (58.54%)	378 (58.97%)	112 (52.34%)
Age	n=739	n=633	n=212
25 or less	130 (17.59%)	147 (23.22%)	53 (25.00%)
26 to 35	184 (24.90%)	159 (25.12%)	77 (36.32%)
36 to 45	219 (29.63%)	198 (31.28%)	61 (28.77%)
46 to 55	141 (19.08%)	102 (16.11%)	14 (6.60%)
56 to 65	55 (7.44%)	22 (3.48%)	4 (1.89%)
66 or above	10 (1.35%)	5 (0.79%)	3 (1.42%)
Education	n=753	n=634	n=211
Less than secondary/high school	165 (21.91%)	48 (7.57%)	27 (12.80%)
Completed secondary/high school	201 (26.69%)	248 (39.12%)	75 (35.55%)
(Attended) Some college or University	55 (7.30%)	81 (12.78%)	10 (4.74%)
Completed college/university degree/diploma	280 (37.18%)	220 (34.70%)	89 (42.18%)
Completed postgraduate degree	52 (6.91%)	37 (5.84%)	10 (4.74%)
Income (HK$7.8 = US$1)	n=643	n=523	n=172
HK$9,999 or less	32 (4.98%)	21 (4.02%)	4 (2.33%)
HK$10,000-HK$19,999	130 (20.22%)	106 (20.27%)	18 (10.47%)
HK$20,000-HK$29,999	128 (19.91%)	128 (24.47%)	39 (22.67%)
HK$30,000-HK$39,999	118 (18.35%)	87 (16.63%)	33 (19.19%)
HK$40,000-HK$49,999	72 (11.20%)	64 (12.24%)	27 (15.70%)
HK$50,000-HK$59,999	43 (6.69%)	46 (8.80%)	13 (7.56%)
HK$60,000-HK$69,999	30 (4.67%)	20 (3.82%)	6 (3.49%)
HK$70,000 or above	90 (14.00%)	51 (9.75%)	32 (18.60%)

The demographic profile of this study about e-browsers and e-buyers is presented in the second column in Table 3. Among the 755 travel-website users, 25.3% had previously purchased travel service/products online, and 74.3% were e-browsers. The percentages of male and female e-buyers were approximately the same. Most of these respondents were aged between 26 and 45, had completed tertiary education, and had monthly incomes that ranged from HK$10,000 to HK$39,999. Chi-square results showed that e-browsers and e-buyers differed significantly in terms of educational level and monthly household income. Specifically, the tendency to purchase on travel websites increased with increasing education and income levels. This finding is similar to those obtained in prior studies (Cheung & Law, 2009; Law & Bai, 2008).

Table 3

A Comparison of e-Buyers and e-Browsers among Different Years

Study	This study	Cheung & Law (2009)	Law & Wong (2003)
Year of data collection / Total respondents	2009 / n=1,455	2007 / n=2,012	2000 / n=952
	Have you visited any travel websites in the past two years?		
	Yes (51.9%)	Yes (31.9%)	Yes (22.5%)
Gender	**n=755**	**n=641**	**n=214**
Male	313 (41.46%)	263 (41.03%)	102 (47.66%)
Female	442 (58.54%)	378 (58.97%)	112 (52.34%)
Age	**n=739**	**n=633**	**n=212**
25 or less	130 (17.59%)	147 (23.22%)	53 (25.00%)
26 to 35	184 (24.90%)	159 (25.12%)	77 (36.32%)
36 to 45	219 (29.63%)	198 (31.28%)	61 (28.77%)
46 to 55	141 (19.08%)	102 (16.11%)	14 (6.60%)
56 to 65	55 (7.44%)	22 (3.48%)	4 (1.89%)
66 or above	10 (1.35%)	5 (0.79%)	3 (1.42%)
Education	**n=753**	**n=634**	**n=211**
Less than secondary/high school	165 (21.91%)	48 (7.57%)	27 (12.80%)
Completed secondary/high school	201 (26.69%)	248 (39.12%)	75 (35.55%)
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Completed college/university degree/diploma	280 (37.18%)	220 (34.70%)	89 (42.18%)
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HK$30,000-HK$39,999	118 (18.35%)	87 (16.63%)	33 (19.19%)
HK$40,000-HK$49,999	72 (11.20%)	64 (12.24%)	27 (15.70%)
HK$50,000-HK$59,999	43 (6.69%)	46 (8.80%)	13 (7.56%)
HK$60,000-HK$69,999	30 (4.67%)	20 (3.82%)	6 (3.49%)
HK$70,000 or above	90 (14.00%)	51 (9.75%)	32 (18.60%)

Table 3 also summarizes the profile of e-buyers and e-browsers in 2000 and 2007:There were more female than male e-buyers and e-browsers. In terms of age, the majority of e-buyers were 26 to 45 years old. From 2007 to 2009, the percentage in the 26 to 35 year-old age group increased by 5.24%, and the percentatage for those aged 25 or less decreased by 6.38%. It appeared that more middle-aged consumers become online buyers. Graeff and Harmon (2002) found that during online purchasing, older Internet users are more aware of privacy issues than younger consumers. Hence, to attract more mature e-buyers, practitioners should consider improving the privacy of information submitted to their websites.

According to the findings of the three studies, most e-buyers had tertiary education, followed by those with secondary education. However, the percentage of e-buyers with secondary education dropped by 5.37% from 2007 to 2009. Additionally, the percentage of e-buyers with postgraduate degrees was quite stable from 2000 to 2009. Another change was that in 2000, the majority of e-buyers had monthly household incomes of HK$70,000 or above, but in 2007 that level had dropped to between HK$20,000 and HK$29,999, which was followed by the group of HK$70,000 or above. In 2009, the majority of respondents was from the income group of between HK$20,000 and HK$39,999, followed by HK$70,000 or above. Koyuncu and Lien (2003) claimed that people with high incomes are more likely to shop online. The findings of this study, however, indicated that e-buyers are changing, and that a medium-income group of purchasers is emerging.

Among e-browsers, the percentage of those aged 25 or less and in the age group of 26 to 35 slowly declined from 2000 to 2009. In 2009, the number of respondents in the age groups of 46 to 55 and 56 to 65 increased by 4.17% and 5.16%, respectively. Similarly to the changes among e-buyers, more middle-aged people are now searching online for travel information. In 2000 and 2009, most e-browsers were tertiary educated, but in 2007 the majority were only secondary educated. Furthermore, the percentage of e-browsers with low and medium incomes has increased. However, the percentage of e-browsers with a monthly income of HK$70,000 or above also increased by 7.05% from 2007 to 2009, returning the group to approximately its level in 2000 (13.0%).

Figure 1 shows the comparison among offline users, e-buyers, and e-browsers in the years 2000, 2007, and 2009. The percentage of online travel-website users had increased by a large amount, from 22.5% in 2000 to 51.6% in 2009. This finding suggests that browsing for travel information has become more popular for Internet users. More importantly, the percentage of e-buyers increased rapidly from 1.47% in 2000 to 13.05% in 2009. This encouraging finding shows the increasing use of travel websites by people who actually make purchases.

Figure 1

Comparison of Offline Users, e-Buyers and e-Browsers among Different Years

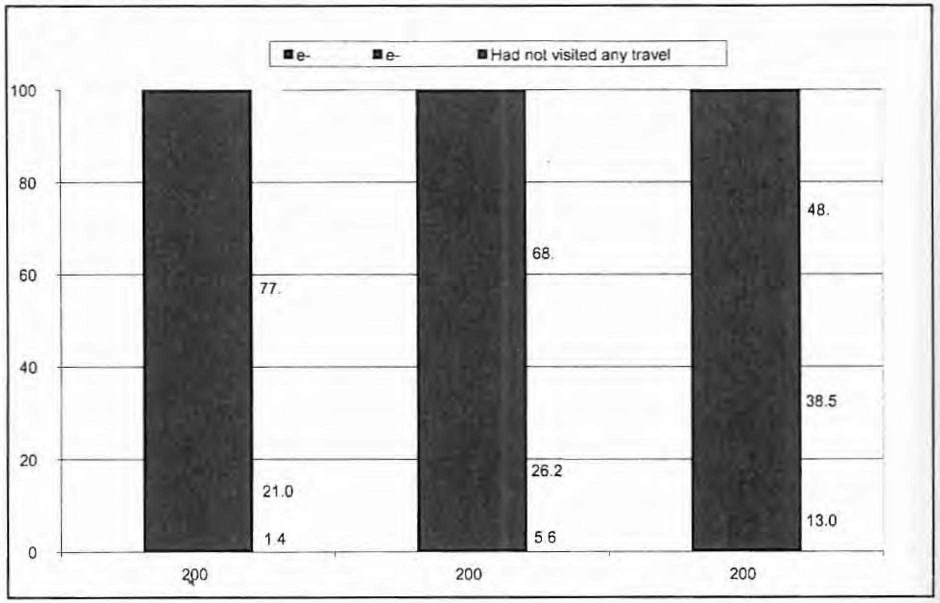

Table 4 shows the result of the five factors that travel-website users considered most important in affecting their online purchases.

Table 4

Ranking of Success Factors in 2009

	e-buyer		e-browser		Overall
Success Factor	Number	%	Number	%	
Payment security	163	85.8%	490	87.5%	653
Price	159	83.7%	399	71.3%	558
Website's reputation	132	69.5%	403	72.0%	535
Website's usability (design or ease of use)	46	24.2%	130	23.2%	176
Website's functionality (content)	45	23.7%	93	16.6%	138

Most of the respondents perceived payment security to be the most important factor (n=653), followed by price (n=558) and website reputation (n=535). Website usability (n=176) and functionality (n=138), in contrast, were not as popular. Other than price and website reputation, e-buyers and e-browsers had the same preferences. As e-browsers were mainly information searchers, it is likely that they considered website reputation more important than price.

In the study conducted in 2000, there were 12 website success factors but only e-buyers were asked about them. Secure payment methods, different price ranges, and a user-friendly system were considered to be the most important factors (Law & Wong, 2003). Cheung and Law (2009) listed five website success factors, with rapid information search, a user-friendly system, and secure payment methods perceived as the most important. Different price ranges for products/services and online booking and confirmation were considered of only average importance. The findings from 2007 also showed that e-buyers considered secure payment methods and online booking and confirmation more important than e-browsers did. After the financial crisis in 2008 and 2009, the perceptions of e-consumers reverted to those found in the 2000 study.

Additionally, payment security was considered an important factor across all three studies, joined by website reputation as one of the three most important factors in 2009. Consumers need confidence to shop online; a website that offers a safe environment and has a good record may be highly attractive to e-buyers of travel websites. Although website usability and functionality were perceived to be less important, they are not unimportant. Prior studies have proven that website design and content have direct impacts on consumer satisfaction and trust (Au Yeung & Law, 2006; Kaplanidou & Vogt, 2006; Law & Hsu, 2006).

Conclusions

This study investigated the profile of Hong Kong residents' perceptions of travel-related websites based on their experience and preferences. Findings collected in 2009 were compared to those from two previous surveys, conducted in 2007 and 2000.

As indicated earlier, there were increasing percentages of travel-website users and e-buyers from 2000 to 2009. Moreover, a majority of respondents were travel- website users. These findings indicate the investments that tourism practitioners will have to make on their websites in order to render positive returns. The majority of e-browsers have stabilized at 26 to 45 years of age, with tertiary education and a medium monthly income. Hence, tourism practitioners and researchers should focus on finding ways to attract more middle-aged e-buyers. These website users have relatively less online experience compared with their younger counterparts. Thus, practitioners should consider improving the usefulness of their websites to attract more middle-aged users.

In addition, web security and pricing were more significant to users in 2009 than they were in 2007 and 2000. Tourism practitioners should thus provide stable prices and a secure web environment for their customers. Moreover, website reputation was found to be important when deciding to purchase travel-related products online. Degeratu et al. (2000) stated that many online browsers search for information based on brand names. Hence, the enhancement of online reputations will lead to more potential consumers of travel websites.

The major constraints of this study are the limited number of questions and the involvement of respondents from one geographical region. Future studies should increase the number of questions and interview travel-website users in other tourist- generating regions. Findings of the study are also limited in that the questions ranking the importance of travel-website success factors were not entirely consistent with those of the two previous studies. Further research should consider the implications of the differences in questions and of using scale-type questions to better reflect consumer perceptions.

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