UNIVERSITI PUTRA MALAYSIA

CONTENT ANALYSIS OF IRANIAN TOURISM WEBSITES BASED ON MEDIA RICHNESS THEORY

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FBMK 2009 1

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BY

MASOUMEH SAATSAZ

Thesis **Submitted to** the School of Graduate Studies, Universiti Putra Malaysia, in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Science

February 2009

This is dedicated to my husband Dr. Masoud Saatsaz,
who has been always my inspiration

Abstract of thesis presented to the Senate of Universiti Putra Malaysia in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Master of Science

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BY

Masoumeh Saatsaz

February 2009

Chairman: Professor Musa bin Abu Hassan, PhD

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This research was conducted to examine media richness theory in the content of Iranian tourism websites. Eighty one Iranian tourism website with different tourism services formed the population which was obtained from KETABE AVAL directory within two weeks in December 2007. Due to the limited number of websites in the population, the researcher decided to analyze the whole of population, so a census was carried out. The researcher defined the richness factors based on the elements and techniques of a website design, and these techniques and elements were analyzed according to the frequency of use on the investigated websites. Hence, the content analysis technique was recognized as the most suitable method to conduct this research. For pretesting 20 websites were randomly selected and analyzed in order to refine codes. The

results showed that the findings of the pre-test answer the research questions. The coded data were analyzed using Microsoft Excel 2003.

The results of the analysis were presented in the form of cross tables containing frequencies and percentages for the different tourism services, which helped the researcher in discussing about (the conditions of) the tourism websites in Iran. The results yielded in the study and the discussions showed that although tourism websites in Iran mostly employed different feedback techniques (approximately 82.7%), only half of them made quick feedback to their customers (50.6%). In terms of multiplicity of cues and channels more than half (54.4%) of the websites did not applied various information channels to present their products and services. But they were moderately available in two languages (i.e. Farsi and English) by 60.5%. In addition, half of them were moderately readable and conversely only 17.4% of the websites were highly searchable (i.e. easy to navigate) in terms of personal focus factor. the researcher also put forward some suggestions for other researchers who wish to carry out similar studies in the future.

Abstrak tesis yang dikemukakan kepada Senat Universiti Putra Malaysia

sebagai memenuhi sebahgian keperluan untuk ijazah Master Sains

PENGUJIAN TEORI PENGAYAAN MEDIA KE ATAS KANDUNGAN LAMAN WEB PELANCONGAN IRAN

Oleh

Masoumeh Saatsaz

Februari 2009

Pengerusi: Profesor Musa bin Abu Hassan, PhD

Fakulti: Fakulti Bahasa Moden dan Komunikasi

Kajian ini dijalankan untuk mengkaji teori pengayaan media dalam kandungan laman web pelancongan Iran. Sebanyak 81 laman web pelancongan Iran daripada pelbagai perkhidmatan pelancongan telah dipilih untuk kajian. Laman web ini diperoleh daripada direktori KETABEAVAL dalam tempoh dua minggu pada bulan Disember 2007. Oleh sebab populasi laman web yang diperoleh adalah kecil, maka penyelidik memutuskan untuk menganalisa keseluruhan populasi, oleh itu satu bancian telah dibuat. Penyelidik telah mendefinisikan faktor pengayaan berdasarkan elemen dan teknik rekabentuk laman web dan teknik serta elemen ini dinalaisa mengikut frekuensi penggunaannya pada laman web yang dikaji. Oleh itu, teknik analisa kandungan telah dikenalpasti sebagai kaedah paling sesuai untuk kajian ini. Dua puluh laman web dipilih secara rambang untuk pra-pengujian dan dianalisa untuk memurnikan kod.

Keputusannya menunjukkan bahawa hasil dapatan jawapan pra-pengujian menjawab soalan –soalan kajian. Data yang telah dikod dianalisa menggunakan Microsoft Excel 2003.

Hasil analisa telah diberi dalam bentuk jadual silang yang mengandungi frekuensi serta peratus untuk perkhidmatan pelancongan yang berbeza. Ini telah membantu penyelidik membincangkan keadaan laman web pelancongan di Iran. Keputusan dan perbincangan yang didapati daripada kajian ini menunjukkan bahawa walaupun kebanyakkan laman web pelancongan di Iran menggunakan teknik maklumbalas berbeza (lebih kurang 82.7%), hanya separuh yang member respon segera kepada pelnggan (50.6%). Dalam hal kepelbagaian petunjuk dan saluran, lebih daripada separuh (54.4%) laman web tidak mengaplikasi pelbagai saluran informasi untuk mempersembahkan produk dan perkhidmatan mereka. Walau bagaimanapun agak banyak (60.5%) laman web tersebut boleh didapati di dalam dua bahasa (Parsi dan Bahasa Inggeris) . Didapati jua, separuh daripada laman web tersebut boleh dibaca tetapi hanya 17.4% laman web yang mudah dicapai bersabit dengan faktor fokus peribadi. Penyelidik juga telah mengajukan cadangan untuk para penyelidik lain yang ingin menjalankan kajian yang sama pada masa hadapan.

Acknowledgement

Firstly, I thank God for the opportunity to take on this challenge. Thank you for providing me strength, talents, tools and special people that aided me in the completion of this task. I thank my supervisor Prof. Dr. Musa Abu Hassan for his assistance and guidance through this study. Thank you for the long hours that you dedicated to this script, for helping me to achieve my best. Your support is greatly appreciated. I would like to express my sincere gratitude to Dr. Jusang Bolong for being very supportive and helpful during the work process of this thesis. And I thank my husband for his love, interest, financial and emotional support.

I certify that an Examination Committee has met on **10 February 2009** to conduct the final examination of **Masoumeh Saatsaz** on her **Master of Science** thesis entitled " **CONTENT ANALYSIS OF IRANIAN TOURISM WEBSITES BASED ON MEDIA RICHNESS THEORY**" in accordance with Universiti Pertanian Malaysia (Higher Degree) Act 1980 and Universiti Pertanian Malaysia (Higher Degree) Regulations 1981. The Committee recommends that the candidate be awarded the degree of Master of Science.

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List of Abbreviations

ARPA	Advanced Research Projects Agency
B2B	Business to Business
B2C	Business to Consumer
CHTO	Handicrafts and Tourism Organization
CRS	Computer Reservation Systems
DSL	Digital Subscriber Line
E-business	Electronic business
E-Commerce	Electronic commerce
E-mail	Electronic mail
E-tourism	Electronic tourism
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
HCI	High Council of Information
ICP	Internet Connection Providers
ICT	Information & Communication Technology
InterNIC	The Internet Network Information Center
IP	Internet Protocol
IPM	for Studies in Theoretical Physics and Mathematics
IRNA	Iran News Agency
ISP	Internet Service Provider
ISP	Internet Service provider
ITTO	Iran Travel & Tourism Organization
MRT	Media Richness Theory
PAP	Public Access Providers
PAP	Public Access Provider
PTT	Post, Telephone and Telegraph
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
VPN	virtual private network
VPN	Virtual Private Networks
WAN	wide area network
WAN	Wide Area Network
WTO	World Tourism Organization
WTTC	World Travel and Tourism Council
WWW or Web	World Wide Web

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

This chapter introduces the background and basic ideas of this study, and they are organized under the following topics: Background of the Study; Statement of the Problem; Research Objectives; Significance of Study; Limitations of the Study; and Definition of key terms

Background of the Study

Within a decade, the Tourism and Travel industry has become an economic phenomenon. This development is affected by a number of factors, such as the growing prosperity in society, an increase in leisure time, new modes of communication and a growing population.

The communication factor, i.e. the emergence of information and communication technologies (ICT) in the tourism industry, has allowed tourists from countries all over the world to access the essential travel information and services. This is especially the Internet, which serves as a global network, has helped the tourism industry to get promoted even more. This is proven by Brassington and Pettitt (2003:1055) who claimed that the Internet has increasingly become an important marketing tool which has had

a dramatic effect on the approaches to marketing, as well as the communication strategies.

Internet, as new communication and information tool, has also brought many benefits for every business such as Tourism which can not be easily ignored. Below are some of the advantages described by Liu (2000) in relation to the use of the Internet for marketing:

Addressability of the Internet, which refers to the various communication paradigms such as one to many and one-to-one, is the first advantage. In this specific, the Internet enables a company to individually "address" the consumers in its marketing communications. This is possible as each time a user visits its website, the server (used by the company) will have a record of that particular user's electronic address. The company can then "narrowcast" it by sending a tailor-made message content, i.e. to a smaller target audience or an individual consumer (Helnen, 1996; Hoffman and Novak, 1996).

The second advantage involves the interactivity of the Internet which allows the companies to establish direct communication with their consumers and create this opportunity for the consumers to give feedback directly.

Moreover, the flexibility of the Internet makes it a multi-usage tool. Tourism companies can use the internet and the Web as an electronic billboard,

mainly for advertisement purposes and the preparation of e-catalogues for their products and services.

Finally, Liu (2000) describes the accessibility of the Web, which refers to the information availability and user interaction. Through effective web site, a company is on business on a global spectrum 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. Any web user in the world can access the marketing information of the company at any time convenient for him/ her. Consequently, it is important for every tourism organization to take advantage of all the facilities provided by the Internet. This new channel permits the people to become aware of the Travel and Tourism opportunities, as well as to compare offerings, communicate with tourism organization directly to purchase tourism services, and make post-travel feedback. Therefore, the new environment has potentially created a new competitive situation for all tourism organizations.

This means the tourism organizations should not only employ the Internet features, but also monitor and assess these tools to overcome their rivals in the global market. One of these marketing tools can be the World Wide Web, specifically the websites which serve as interfaces between organizations and consumers. This assessment can be vary, depending on the final expected output and it should be based on a certain framework; it can be according to technical, economical or communicational contexts. This can only be done provided that there is a good understanding of the Internet, World Wide Web and its advantages to other marketing communication tools.

The lack of understanding, on how to capitalize the opportunities brought by the Internet, is one of the major obstacles faced by the members of the Iranian tourism industry today. Besides, there are just a limited number of studies which have been done on the effectiveness of the Iranian tourism websites so far.

Currently, Iran has drawn up certain plans which will be and are being implemented. These plans are said to lead to economic growth and elimination of poverty, mainly in the underdeveloped regions of the country (Iran News Agency, 2007). One of these plans is for the tourism industry to take advantage of the existing capacities, such as information and communication technologies like the Web.

The short-term plan includes preserving the country's historical, cultural and natural relics, attracting foreign investment within the frame of the foreign investment laws of the country, establishing bilateral relations for the exchange of information, facilitating visa issuance to foreign tourists through issuing visa at five international airports in Iran, upon their arrival in the country. For the development of tourism in the medium-term scheme, Iran has several plans which include launching its electronic visa issuance system, promoting Iran in the international market and familiarizing tourism by inviting credible international travel writers, having a close working relationship with the private sector, as well as launching tourism offices for Iran at the domestic level and abroad.

Finally, the long-term plans for the tourism industry in Iran include increasing the share in the global tourism market over a 20-year period by about 1.5 percent of the international tourists, which also means receiving at least 20 million tourists and earning about 2 percent global revenues of the tourism industry, or at least 25 billion USD; and a projection of a 30 percent of the annual growth rate for tourism by the Fourth Economic, Social and Cultural Development Plan (Iran Travel & Tourism Organization, 2005).

Statement of research problem

Nowadays, travellers make a lot of comparisons before or when planning any travel arrangements. As a result, one of the most important attributes of a website, as perceived by travel purchasers, is the richness of its content which affects on customer decision making. Therefore, it is crucial to design travel websites which possess good usability performance, ultimately making the websites efficient and enjoyable to use (Lu and Yeung, 1998).

Although marketing communication is the purpose of all websites (Du Plessis et al., 2004), but there are few number of studies has been done on it. There are some studies which have done on the tourism and hospitality (Ham, 2004; Wan 2002; Kline et al., 2004) and evaluated the tourism websites. These studies have evaluated the websites in accommodation establishments in various countries based on certain categories of website features. Content of the websites have crucial role in the marketing communication cycle, none of these studies have evaluated the websites

content richness. These studies were also not conducted within Iran context. Meanwhile, there is a few studies have been done on Iranian tourism website evaluation (Jafari, 2008) which is not sufficient to draw clear picture of Iran e-tourism.

Considering above explanation, this study examines Iranian tourism websites content under Media Richness Theory as a powerful framework to create better understanding of Iranian tourism website status, as well as provides a clearer picture of the status of the tourism electronic marketing in Iran.

Research Objectives

Considering the explanation of the problem statement, the main research objective is to identify the richness of the content of the Iranian tourism websites according to the Media Richness Theory. And the objective of this study had been achieved by providing the following information as its specific objectives:

a. To investigate the extent of immediacy feedback factor on the Iranian tourism websites.

b. To identify the extent of multiplicity of information channels on the Iranian tourism websites.

c. To identify the extent of language varieties factor available on the Iranian tourism websites.

d. To identify the extent of personal focus factor on the Iranian tourism websites.

Significance of the Study

In order to fully deploy the understanding of the Internet within the tourism industry, a better understanding of online market evaluation is critical. This research determines to measure the richness of the tourism websites in Iran because the tourism industry plays an important role in the economy of the country. The richness of the content has the key role in the online tourism marketing. Equally important is the evaluation of these websites as marketing tools; it should be done using a certain framework. This study evaluated the tourism websites of Iran, according to the richness factors as have been defined in the Media Richness Theory. The Media Richness theory, as a framework, creates opportunities for the researcher to use the content analysis method in measuring the effectiveness of these websites.

The study results will be very helpful for the "Master Plan of the Iranian Tourism Industry" (Iran Travel and Tourism Organization, 2001) which has been made to promote travel and tourism industry by 2017.

Besides the research findings will be useful for both Iranian tourism companies that already launched their company Web sites on the net, and as well as for those which are planning to present. And also, by using descriptive statistics, this study will be able to generate a profile of content richness on Iranian tourism and travel web sites which helps Iran Tourism organizations first to improve the tourism online marketing condition and

second helps their manager to get more advantage of Internet potentials regarding e-tourism issues.

Limitations of the Study

This study possessed some limitations which might affect any conclusion drawn from the results yielded in the study. These are as follows:

- There was no updated statistic information regarding the tourists, tourist providers and the organizations, who are closely working in this field.
- Lack of reports on the E-tourism status in Iran on the Internet.
- There were a few related researches which had been done on the Internet and tourism in Iran. Therefore, the literature written about the tourism industry in Iran is rather limited.

Definition of Key Terms

This study uses a number of key concepts, such as Tourism, the Internet, World Wide Web, Website, E-commerce, E-tourism and the Media Richness Theory. The manner, in which these key terms have been defined for the purpose of this study, is considered as below:

- **Tourism**

Tourism is the sum of the phenomena and relationships arising from the interaction among tourists, business suppliers, host governments, host communities and non-governmental organizations, in the process of attracting, transporting, hosting and managing these tourists and other visitors (Weaver & Opperman, 2000). The Tourism Industry is further divided into five main services, which are:

- **The Internet**

Brown (1997) describes the Internet as the most significant development in communications since the invention of the telephone. From its humble foray into the commercial world in 1992, the Internet has revolutionized the way in which we communicate. The term 'Internet' is an acronym for International Network, but it is most commonly described as a network of networks.

- **The World Wide Web**

The WWW provides a structure to the Internet by allowing information to be manipulated through a graphical user interface (Harris, 1996).

- **Website**

A website was defined as "…a collection of related Web pages, and associated items, such as document and pictures, stored on a Web server" (Shelly, Cashman and Vermaate, 2003).