Tourism Mobile Application Usability: The Case of iTicino

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ABSTRACT

Mobile communication is experiencing significant growth: the domain has been completely reshaped since the launch of the Apple iPhone (June 2007) and the ensuing development of so-called “smartphones”. Furthermore, together with the expansion of new mobile artifacts, mobile application markets (such as Apple iTunes Store and Android Google Play market) have contributed to the diffusion of new forms of communication within different sectors and domains. Tourism is being very much exposed to the advent of mobile applications as tools for communication and assistance during the consumption of touristic experiences. By examining a case from the tourism industry, this research highlights the importance of the usability of mobile communication in this mobile tourism (mTourism) context. mTourism usability can be achieved by emphasizing the importance of fast and reliable access to content, as well as the quality – particularly conciseness, accuracy and coverage – of the relevant information.

Keywords: eTourism, mTourism, Mobile Communication, Mobile Tourism Guides, Mobile Usability

INTRODUCTION

In 1997 Sheldon underlined that both the tourism and information technology industries together or separately, were transforming the way in which society was organized and managed. What has been clear since is the fact that the information industry was actually able to move, stock and manage a large amount of information, due to information technologies (Sheldon, 1997). Given that tourism is an information intensive industry (Poon, 1993), where information management is essential for day-to-day operations (Gretzel et al., 2000), the interplay within these two fast growing domains was predictable. As observed by Cooper, Fletcher, Gilbert, Fyall and Wanhill (2008:628), “information is the lifeblood of tourism and so technology is fundamental for the ability of the industry to operate”. Thus, the application of the new technologies to the tourism field is an essential requirement in order to guarantee its growth and success. As proposed by Buhalis (2003), this new form of tourism, the so-called eTourism, refers to the digitalization of all the processes and value chains in the tourism, travel,
hospitality and catering industry that enable organizations to maximize their efficiency and effectiveness.

The growing importance of the internet, at management, marketing and sales levels (Whertner & Klein, 1999), has considerably reshaped the tourism industry: modern traveler is sophisticated and in constant need of information (Buhalas & Law, 2008). Gretzel, Fesenmeier, and O’Leary (2006) observed that travelers have specific information needs during the tourism goods experience stages which can be satisfied with the use of ICT (Information and Communication Technologies) related artifacts. During the pre-consumption phase, ICTs are used mainly (i) to obtain information about the destination, (ii) to plan the trip in detail, (iii) to decide between alternatives, and (iv) to communicate with suppliers (e.g. hotels and car rental companies). In the consumption stage, ICTs are used with the intention to obtain more accurate information related to a specific event or place in a specific time and thus make decisions in the short-term. In the post-consumption phase, technologies are used in order to (i) re-experience the same emotions felt at the destination, (ii) to share experiences with other users, and thus (iii) to keep contact with suppliers (ibid.). Pre- and post-consumption phases are generally characterized by the use of official (such as destination sites) or unofficial (such as tripadvisor.com) websites (Inversini & Buhalas, 2009).

Choi, Lehto and O’Leary (2007) and Wang (2008) identified traveler needs with respect to the destination website while at the destination (i.e. consumption phase): destination websites can actually meet tourist needs but often require the use of desktop computers without considering contextual (mostly time and space) related information. Desktop navigation and destination websites can serve the pre-consumption and post-consumption phase, but the consumption phase itself is in need of new tools and applications to serve user needs effectively. A relatively new trend is Mobile Tourism (mTourism – Kenteris et al., 2010) where tourism information is disseminated through mobile applications. Grün, Pröll, Werthner and Retschitzegger (2008) identified 12 service categories that a mobile tourist application has to fulfill in order to satisfy tourist information needs. The categories are similar to the previous information categories presented by Rasinger et al. (2007). However, this list is more extensive and also contains categories such as (i) Accommodation, (ii) Emergency, Safety, Security, (iii) Entertainment (iv) Gastronomy (v) Navigation and Orientation, (vi) News, (vii) Practical Information (viii) Shopping, (ix) Sports, (x) Tourist Attractions, (xi) Transport and (xii) Weather (Grün et al., 2008). These categories are generic and reflect most of the destination website structures that can be found in the literature, but with the support of built-in mobile technology functionalities (such as “around me”), they may be more interesting and attractive for tourist during the consumption phase.

Thus, giving the growing importance of this form of communication, the purpose of this research is to discuss the importance of the usability of mobile tourism applications starting from a case study of a popular regional destination guide designed and developed in the south of Switzerland. In the next sections the paper will discuss the relevant literature about (i) mTourism, (ii) mobile guides applications and (iii) mobile usability. Then the case study is introduced together with the research design and the methodology used in the research. The last three sections regard the results presentation, their discussion and the conclusions.

LITERATURE

mTourism

The satisfaction of information needs during the consumption phase is critical for a good tourism experience (Gretzel et al., 2006). During the consumption phase, based on specific user needs, different technologies (other than desktop internet browsing) are becoming popular and among these, mobile technologies (such
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