ABSTRACT

This paper examines the way in which consumers perceive a convenient service when shopping online in Taiwan. When consumers interact with a website a good impression of the website is vital. E-service providers need to constantly deliver convenient services through their websites so online consumers are able to develop trust prior to purchase. Online interactivity is likely to be the primary drivers online service convenience. Moreover, service convenience is an important consideration for most online consumers because it has a major impact on consumers’ decision making in relation to saving time and effort. Convenience has traditionally been conceptualised as a time-and-effort dominated phenomenon, this research re-examined the nature of convenience in the context of e-commerce. It reveals that an important oversight regarding convenience is that it consists not only of time and effort dimensions, but also of control and technology dimensions. Results indicate that the Internet enables travel agencies to provide service convenience in terms of saving effort, etc as consumers purchase tourism products online. Consumer Control seems to be another important attribute underlying the notion of convenience in the service industry. Consumers are enabled to access a CRS system to plan and reserve their journey whenever and wherever they feel it is convenient from them to do so. Consumers may book two flights first (the same day with different airlines or the same route with different departure dates) thorough the system when planning their journeys. During the period of decision-making, this means that consumers have more product choices. Furthermore, if their travel plans change, they have readily available alternative. This avoids the problem of consumers being disappointed especially in the high season.
1. INTRODUCTION

Travel products are mostly intangible personal service products, involving personal interactions between consumers and service providers (i.e. travel agents). They are delivered from outside the home, often in unknown places, inducing functional, financial, physical, psychological and social risks (Lovelock, 1994). Moreover, the consumption and production of tourism products always coincide, creating high personal involvement. According to the economics of information, these characteristics often lead to high personal investments of time, effort and monetary resources in consumer decision-making (Lambert, 1998). Information has long been recognised to be the key driver in consumer decision-making. In the electronic marketplace, the search for travel information online enables consumers to reduce the level of uncertainty and to enhance the quality of their trips, saving consumers time and effort.

Previous empirical research has considered service convenience in relation to time and effort, with this work approaching the topic from the consumer’s viewpoint. Gehrt and Yale (1993) used a “consumer diary” kept by 20 head-of-household for three weeks to gauge perceptions of convenience. Later, Gehrt et al (1996) reapplied the same method, extending the period of data collection to one month and arguing that convenience is a multi-dimensional conceptualisation. Berry et al (2002) proposed a multidimensional conceptual model of service convenience; however, empirical data has not yet been employed to test the model. This research addresses the concept of convenience from the consumer’s perspective, which means adopting a different approach. The concept of convenience is therefore addressed using in-depth consumer interviews and through the analysis of empirical data. The objective is to characterise and investigate e-service convenience in the electronic marketplace. The paper first discusses the literature on convenience. An analysis of evidence is then used to show what consumers expect a convenient service through the Tourism websites. Finally, conclusions are drawn which suggest that the Internet enables consumers to save time and effort when purchasing tourism products in Taiwan.

2. THE CONCEPT OF CONVENIENCE

The concept of convenience in consumer behaviour was first introduced by Copeland (1923) who suggested the new-classic product typology: convenience, shopping and specialty goods. Copeland (1923, p.282) defines convenience goods as: “...those customarily purchased at easily accessible stores.” The idea of time-saving is implied in his research. Consumers purchase convenience goods at stores located near their houses or offices which they can visit easily. There is a tendency that consumers purchase products with which they are most
familiar. These repeat consumptions enable the development of big shopping malls. It indicates that consumers minimise time, physical and mental effort when purchasing. Holton (1958) argues these three new-classic product types may vary depending on the perceptions and shopping habits among consumers. Consumers may consider a good based on their perception of the probable gain from making purchase price and quality comparisons among alternative sellers. The probable gain may be small relative to the consumers’ assessment of the searching costs in terms of time, money and efforts. Moreover, Downs (1961) observed that consumers seek to minimise three costs of consumption: money, time and energy in the consumption process. The consumption process is distinguished by the dual motives of (1) satisfying some immediate want and need, and (2) releasing time or energy for alternative uses (Anderson, 1972).

Previous studies (Berry, 1979; Etgar, 1978; Stigler, 1961) which adopted the economics of information theory regard convenience as a uni-dimensional, time-oriented conceptualisation which only partially explains the phenomenology of convenience. Reilly (1982), Yale and Venkatesh (1986) and Yale and Venkatesh (1993) have criticised the uni-dimensional, time-oriented conceptualisation of convenience, suggesting that the phenomenon is not limited to time issues. Later, Yale and Venkatesh (1993) unite the discussion around the concept of convenience and propose a comprehensive re-conceptualisation model based on a multi-dimensional construct. The six classes of convenience are time utilisation, accessibility, handiness, appropriateness, portability and avoidance of unpleasantness. These dimensions seem to represent more cognitive efficiency aspects of convenience.

Brown (1990) suggests that the concept of convenience has five dimensions: (1) a time dimension: services may be provided at a time that is more convenient for the consumer, (2) a place dimension: services may be provided in a place that is more convenient for the consumer, (3) an acquisition dimension: organisations may make it easier for the consumer, financially or otherwise, to purchase their services, (4) a use dimension: services may be made more convenient for the consumer to use, and (5) an execution dimension: perhaps the most obvious convenience, which involves simply having someone else provide services. The first four dimensions are suggested by economic utility theory, which states that consumers desire time, place, possession and form utility. Convenience is, in one sense, a summary variable for the four utilities. The ultimate convenient service would be available continuously everywhere and would require almost no effort to acquire or use. The last dimension differs from the other dimensions in that consumers can choose how much mental or physical effort they wish to expend in obtaining a service. Holbrook (1993) emphasised this utility feature by locating convenience under the concept of efficiency, and arguing that at least when the ratio of benefits to sacrifice deals with time, consumers perceive efficiency as
convenience. These convenience dimensions such time, energy, and effort which consumers give up to buy products or services, may be seen as an attributes that reduces the non-monetary price of a product or service.

From a marketing perspective, Gehrt and Yale (1993) used a qualitative method to re-examine the convenience phenomenon. Using a consumer diary approach, they found that consumers did not always think of the ratio of benefits to sacrifice when convenience was in question. Consumers simply feel that service is fast, within easy reach, easy to use, and so on. They developed the concept of convenience in three dimensions: temporal, spatial and effort. A couple of years later, Gehrt et al (1996) suggested that convenience involves not only time issues but also spatial and effort concerns. These ideas have been supported by empirical data, suggesting convenience is a multi-dimensional conceptualisation. In recent research, convenience has been found to be the major motive for consumers to shop online. In their survey of 220 consumers, Jarvenpaa and Todd, (1997) found that convenience was the single most salient benefit of online shopping. Even though the notion of convenience has been studied, many researchers have argued that further research effort it needed (Berry et al, 2002; Brown, 1990; Rohm and Swaminathan, 2004).

2.1 Type of Convenience

There are at least two broad dimensions to the concept of convenience (Darian and Cohen, 1995). The first dimension concerns the type of convenience. The components of this dimension include saving time, physical energy and mental energy (Berry et al, 2003; Brown, 1989; Gehrt et al, 1996). Furthermore, saving time might involve either less overall time spent in the consumption process or the availability of the product or service at a convenient time. Time is a limited resource which cannot be expanded. In marketing and consumer behaviour literature, consumers place a high degree of value on time (particularly in Western society [Berry, 1979]). Consumers perceive time as an investment or a cost in the consumption process. For example, a family may travel to the big shopping mall in order to fulfil each need rather than travel to individual shops. This means reallocating time to achieve greater efficiency. Economists view the cost of time as an opportunity cost in terms of income forgone or participation in other activities. Literature from economics and sociology suggests that consumers in industrialised and urbanised societies are more concerned with time than are consumers in less developed societies and are more likely to regard time as a scarce resource (Gross, 1987). Berry et al (2003) point out that the marketing literature has assumed a relationship between time scarcity and consumers’ desire for products and services which offer convenience. This view is consistent with economic theory.
The second dimension concerns the timing of convenience, i.e. the stage of the consumption process at which convenience is obtained (Darian and Cohen, 1995). The suggestion is that the desire to save or at least better manage time is an important factor in convenience, with the literature suggesting that “time” is not a simple construct and that other factors must be involved in the desire for convenience (Cherlow, 1981; Holbrook and Lehmann, 1981). The results of these studies of convenience suggest that an examination of the construct is in order. However, the literature has concentrated almost exclusively on the time-saving aspect of convenience. Yet the non-monetary cost issue may be essential to the convenience concept. Anything that saves work (i.e. effort and energy) is also seen also as saving time.

Current research in service convenience focuses on consumer’s time, and effort expenditures, consumer waiting and convenience orientation (Berry et al, 2002). They propose a model of service convenience based upon consumer’s time and effort perceptions related to the purchase or use of a service. The five types of convenience are decision, access, transaction, benefit and post-benefit convenience. Berry et al (2002) view the construct of consumer’s time and effort as the benefits of convenience (saving time and effort) or the burdens of inconvenience (wasting time and effort). In the research, service convenience is also influenced by other constructs such as firm-related factors (e.g. service environment, consumer information, company brand and service system design) and individual consumer differences (e.g. time orientation, time pressure, empathy and experience). Moreover, Wolfinbarger and Gilly (2000) suggest control and freedom seem to have great impact on the concept of convenience in the electronic marketplace. Yen and Gwinner (2003) suggest technology-based factor such as the convenience received from the technology and the perception of being control of the outcome from using the technology positively influence perceived service convenience.

To sum up, most research in convenience focuses on consumer’s time and effort expenditures. Although recent studies have suggested other factors which influence service convenience, little attention has therefore been paid to clarifying the concept of convenience as it applies to the service context.

3. METHODOLOGY

This research used a qualitative research approach employing in-depth interviews as the main method of data collection. Research in the field of service convenience studies has been conducted using either quantitative approaches such as surveys, statistical methods or models (Candel, 2000; Reimers and Clulow, 2004), or qualitative approaches such as consumer diaries (Gehrt and Yale, 1993; Gehrt et al, 1996). A qualitative research method presents
detailed descriptions of consumer behaviour that cannot be measured in a quantifiable manner (Malhotra and Birks, 2000). In-depth interviews have been chosen because they uncover greater depth in terms of the way price affects the decision-making process, and because they enable a fuller understanding of complex consumer behaviour (Malhotra and Birks, 2000). The semi-structured face-to-face interviews were conducted in Mandarin and Taiwanese.

Data were gathered from the consumer side to discover how e-service convenience influences the consumer shopping process. A total of 45 consumers from the north of Taiwan participated in the study. Eligible participants had to be citizens and permanent residents of Taiwan, aged 20 or over. They also had to have made at least one leisure-related online purchase in the last twelve months. People in the travel-related business, such as travel agents, airline staff, hotel employees, advertisers and market researchers were excluded. The average length of the individual interviews was forty-five minutes, and all interviews were recorded and subsequently transcribed. Free-elicitation approaches recommended by Olson and Reynolds (1983) were used to obtain information about the perception of service convenience from consumers. The laddering process involved a sequence of in-depth probes designed to force the consumers up the ladder of abstraction. This procedure has been used successfully in previous studies (Kerin et al, 1992; Zeithaml, 1988), to reveal the links between services attributes. Following the application of these indirect methods, subjects’ responses to open-ended questions were sought. This details about the information needed to make judgements about service convenience and about the impact of related factors on perceptions and definitions of the concept. Demographic and website shopping usage data were collected from respondents at the end of interview.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Unlike previous studies, which mainly focussed on conserving time and effort, our research revealed five findings related to service convenience. These findings are discussed below.

4.1 SAVING TIME

The findings suggest that booking flight tickets, hotel rooms and packaged holidays online saves consumers time if compared to the traditional way. Searching for the information required to make a reservation online takes consumers from ten minutes to several hours depending on whether they are first time or repeated buyers. This is consistent with prior research (Brucks, 1985; Rao and Monroe, 1988; Sujan, 1985) which suggests consumers’ experience may influence the way in which they use information to make purchase decision and assess services. As consumer become familiar with service providers, they perceive a
level of convenience based on their relationship with a particular service providers. In the research, several respondents claimed that they have at least three travel agencies in mind when choosing the service providers. These respondents were very familiar with the ordering process and transactions of certain websites, thus minimising wasted time and energy. This, in turn, influenced consumers’ service expectations and convenience perceptions.

Respondents referred to several ways in which they save time when making a reservation. First, the availability of websites 24 hours a day/7 days a week and not having to wait on the phone to place an order make websites attractive to many consumers. Time spent waiting often involves significant psychological costs (Carmon et al, 1995) and affective reactions (Hui and Tse, 1996). The stress, boredom and anxiety may reduce consumer expectations of the service convenience offered by companies. However, this state of affairs is rarely seen in the electronic marketplace. Respondents claimed that could easily access the website whenever they wanted and did not need to queue to be served or check-out. This apparently was part of the convenience achieved by shopping online. This is in accord with Berry et al’s (2003) research that consumers perceive access convenience by using self-service technology (i.e. internet). This reduces consumer’s reliance on service providers whose accessibility may be inconvenience. Furthermore, the Internet is less expensive than ever before (Burke, 1997). All interviewed consumers were knowledgeable in the handling of computers and they all have their own PCs and Internet access (broadband or ADSL with unlimited usage) either in the office or at home.

Consumers were able to explain the main reasons they prefer book tourism products online. Most do not like to interact with a salesperson either on the phone or face-to-face. Some consumers find it tiring to wait on the telephone for the next available travel agent. Whether it is for a few seconds or longer, they hate to listen to monotonous music. It makes them feel uncomfortable and out of control of the situation. Moreover, consumers complain that being held in a queue wastes their time and prevents them from doing anything else. Conversely, when they choose the online shopping mode, they can search for information and do their work at the same time, opening several windows at the same time. While downloading each webpage, consumers can reply to email messages, search for information or work on their given tasks to complete their order which allows them to maximise time usage. This brings gratification to them as they have received convenience benefits from shopping online.

Other consumers prefer less interaction with a salesperson because they do not like to share their personal information with someone they do not trust. For example, one consumer raised the problem of kidnapping and burglary. They feel it would be better not to let other people know their behaviour patterns. If someone knows a house will be empty over the weekend, a
burglar may try to break in. This situation is impossible to predict and prevent. Therefore, it would be better to keep such information secret. Furthermore, these consumers find that little skill is required to book a flight or hotel room online. Since they have their own travel plans (i.e. flights and hotels) in mind, they do not need to consult a travel agent, preferring to make their own booking.

Secondly, the variety of merchandise available helps consumers to make purchase choices. Some websites are also perceived to be a potential source of inventory information during the high season or when other websites are out of stock. Several consumers preferred to shop on certain travel and tourism websites which clearly state the number of hotel rooms and flight tickets available. Online consumers’ perceptions that e-commerce offered them a better selection, however, often related to the selection available on the Internet as a whole, rather than to the selection on individual sites, which was often perceived as limited compared to offline alternatives. When consumers search for flight tickets from Taipei to Tokyo, for example, there are hundreds of different products ranging from direct flights to indirect flights and from the cheapest fare to the most expensive available. Some consumers appreciate the greater choices available online because are able to identify which flight tickets are currently on sale that would be suitable for their trip and save them money. There is no question that consumers benefit from better online products selection (Wolfinbarger and Gilly, 2000). However, some consumers viewed this level of choice as inconvenient, forcing them to make sense of too many options. These consumers claimed there only 10% of the choices fitted their criteria (e.g. cheaper fare, direct flight and good departure time). They do not see the point of travel agents providing such a long list of options online, perceiving it as overwhelming and unhelpful.

The findings suggest that the reply time is an important factor in assessing online suppliers and evaluating e-service quality. When consumers place their order online, they like to receive one to two confirmation letters. An auto-reply system email states the order has been received and a personalised email states who is dealing with it and providing a contact telephone number within 24 hours depending on whether they have sent an email message or completed an online order form. UP. Respondents’ past experience suggested it takes less than 10 minutes to receive the auto-reply email and the average time taken to receive personalised email is 3.5 hours if the order is placed in the daytime. Consumers feel secure when they receive the first confirmation letter and they perceive themselves to have been served when the second email arrives. This is in line with Wolfinbarger and Gilly (2000), who have studied consumers’ perceptions of the quality of their e-commerce experience, discovered that consumers feel satisfied if they receive a confirmation email within 24 hours of completing their online transactions.
To distinguish the differences which consumers perceive between an auto-reply email and a personalised email, consumers state that the first auto-reply email simply means their orders has arrived safely but it does not state whether or not the order is being processed immediately. When the second email is received, they feel they have been served and the consumption process is under their control. For instance, if consumers need to contact a travel agent, the email tells them the name of the persona they should talk to. The person who is responsible for the consumer’s case is familiar with the whole picture, resulting in more effective and efficient negotiation between the two parties. The majority of consumers made this point during the interviews and considered the personalised email to be a key issue in terms of communication and consultation in online shopping.

One consumer illustrated the importance of online interaction by explaining an instance when she was cancelled a trip. In her case, she was waiting for overseas hotel confirmations. Although she had booked return flight tickets, arranged her vacations and found someone to replace her at work, the travel agent could not confirm the hotels she desired. Due to time pressure and the fact that the hotels in the area were fully booked at that moment, it was too late to change her destination. She was forced to give up her vacation which made her very disappointed not only with the travel agent but also with the company. She has never shopped on that website again. Thus bad communication may lead to consumers’ travel plans being disrupted or being totally unrealisable. This can make consumers negative towards online providers as well as causing inconvenience. There are obvious repercussions for such consumers’ assessment of the company’s service quality.

Another time-related issue emerged from the interviews. Up to eighty per cent of these interviewed consumers do not pay online, choosing the fax mode instead. This involves downloading and printing the credit card payment form from the website, then filling out and faxing the form back to the company to complete the payment procedure. Once these consumers have sent the fax they expect to receive an immediate confirmation message (i.e. a telephone call) from the salesperson responsible for the case. However, it is impossible to fulfil these consumers expectations. One or two fax machines may be shared by a hundred travel agents in the same company and each travel agent may handle up to ten consumers at once. From the consumer perspective, there is a high risk in relation to the monetary aspect, especially to their financial information. This causes a certain degree of anxiety and consumers will often worry until receiving the confirmation message. This process can take from a couple of minutes to a day. As consumers are often unwilling to wait this long, they often circumvent the process by following up the faxed payment form with a telephone call to the salesperson to double check its safe arrival. This reduces the levels of anxiety and fear and
makes consumers feel satisfied.

Finally, the findings raise a question which only occurs in the online shopping mode. This concerns whether consumers actually save time when shopping online? The findings show a paradoxical phenomenon in relation to this issue. During the pre-purchasing stage, consumers may spend a huge amount of time searching for travel-related information online which relates to planning the journey (e.g. departure and arrival time, total flight time, transportation from the airport to the hotel and hotel locations). However, many consumers are not aware of the time taken in searching for this information, perceiving it as fun and as another way of gaining knowledge in preparation for their forthcoming trip. On the other hand, during the on-going stage, consumers definitively spend less time booking compared with traditional modes. Some consumers claim it takes about five to ten minutes to complete the booking process. Their perception of online booking is of an efficient and convenient method which saves them time. This suggests that although online consumers perceive that e-commerce saves them time, this may be primarily based on the fact that the individual purchase stage is particularly quick.

4.2 SAVING EFFORT

The findings suggest that consumers can save effort if they book tourism products online. However, they were unsure when they were asked the questions related to saving effort. They used words such as “might” or “could be.” Their attitudes towards saving effort were relatively unclear compared with their conviction that shopping online could save them time. In this paper, it has been suggested that consumers feel that convenience is related to a saving of effort while shopping online. Consumers point out the ability of search engines to help them plan their trips. If flight tickets are requested, the webpage will list the destination flown by several airlines. The webpage shows all of the major airlines with different prices, number of stopovers, different kinds of tickets (i.e. normal, promotion or last-minute), departure date and airport tax. This enables consumers to build up a general picture and helps them to plan their budget and itinerary with a degree of flexibility. They have access to a greater number of choices rather than being restricted to just a few options.

One consumer recounted her experience in booking flight tickets online. She found that she had broader choices in terms of choosing airline companies with different departure times and with more stable fares. Among the airlines, she could choose her preferred airline alliance rather than being restricted to choosing the cheapest fare. For example, when using a website to purchase a flight ticket, she would be offered a couple of products suitable for her journey. When she used to purchase tourism products offline, the travel agent would primarily sell her
particular products which gave their travel agency commission. Although the price would
sometimes be cheaper and meet her needs, she felt she was being denied a full range of
options. If possible, her preference was to get the whole picture and then choose freely among
these options.

All of the consumers participating in this research were on the mailing lists of several travel
agents (averaging at least three lists each). After purchasing a tourism product on the website,
consumers’ personal information is automatically stored. When consumers revisit the site,
they simply enter their username ID and password. They can see their purchase history, trace
their order or continue purchasing without to keying in personal details. These benefits are
perceived as very convenient in terms of saving effort according to the interviewees. There
are two reasons for this. First of all, some consumers prefer to have their personal mail
delivered to their company addresses or to the post office box. Therefore, they have to key in
at least two different addresses which makes them feel impatient. Next, some websites require
too much personal information which is always marked as required or necessary. Some
consumers argue they would leave the website or key in fake information in order to complete
the ordering process.

4.3 CONVENIENCE RESULTING FROM PLACE AND CONTROL

The findings suggest that consumers do not need to travel to the store or from store to store
when they need to consult a travel agent. They can access a website whenever and wherever
they wish. The e-service provided by companies has been expanded from limited physical
space to unlimited virtual space. Butler and Peppard (1998) argue that space is unlimited to
the extent that it can be easily increased, although there are limitations as to what people can
place on a single webpage. Perhaps the unique characteristic of business on the Internet is its
unconstrained physical space. The Internet enables companies to cover all geographical areas
and constantly deliver service and interact with online consumers through multiple channels.
For example, consumers can purchase flight tickets or book hotel rooms from websites
whether they live in the city or a suburb. In the past, the shopping mobility of consumers
tended to be limited to one metropolitan area but this is not the case in the electronic
marketplace.

Moreover, consumers may choose different kinds of services provided by the company in
order to save a trip. For example, there are several delivery options. Several interviewed
consumers prefer to pay and get the product on their way home. They would probably choose
a supplier with branches in the metropolitan area such as near the Taipei main rail station, the
financial district or a metro station. One consumer described how his daily commute involves
changing to the metro at the Taipei main rail station. He therefore preferred to visit a particular travel agent branch on an assigned date to pay by credit card and pick up the products on his way home. This saves him a trip travelling from the office to the company but also makes him feel that he is being efficient. He can complete a task without expending extra time, effort or money. It is reminiscent of the old proverb “kill two birds with one stone.”

Tourism products are inherently perishable, which means that they cannot be stored (Bessom and Jackson, 1975). Therefore, it is often difficult to synchronise supply and demand in the tourism industry. In the high season, demand may be great, while in the low season, there is too often very little. The literature suggests that each unique characteristic of services leads to specific problems which companies must handle. By employing a computer reservation system (CRS), the problem can be partially solved. Some consumers explained how they find suitable and cheaper flight tickets by booking two flights to begin with, (with different airlines or the same route with different departure dates) leaving themselves more time to shop around. During the period of decision making, they may find discover other offers which they missed before. Furthermore, if their travel plans change, they have a readily available alternative. This can be a useful tactic in the high season when passengers are competing for flight availability.

This finding is in line with Wolfinbarger and Gilly’s (2000) research which concluded that control and freedom underlie the concept of convenience. In the tourism market the notion of control and security seems more important in purchasing perishable products. Services such as flight tickets and hotel rooms cannot be inventoried. The CRS system is able to reduce the uncertainties in making online reservations. The system reserves the flights and hotel rooms for consumers after the booking procedure is completed. This means that consumers do not have to pay for their products immediately after the booking procedure is completed, which provides a certain degree of flexibility and heightens the perception of convenience to online consumers.

### 4.4 INFORMATION CONVENIENCE

As a medium for information distribution and dissemination, the Internet accesses a wide audience. Unlike traditional communications media, the use of voice, video, text and images provides a richer picture to online consumers. Information can be tailored to the requirements of the consumers either by eliciting information from them or through the use of tracking technologies. As a medium of communication from consumer to consumer, some companies provide a bulletin boards or chat rooms free of charge. Consumers may create a virtual community to discuss their travel experiences or to organise a trip as backpackers. This
enables potential consumers to specify their interests and encourages the company to keep them informed of updates or relevant news which would enhance the quality of their trips. In the virtual community, consumers may outline either the kind of interests catered for by certain destinations and invite other consumers to supply the information in order to organise a fraternity of travellers. Other consumers may visit to the virtual community in order to share ideas and gain travel tips (e.g. how to save money or organise their trip). Some of the interviewed consumers took these opinions into account when choosing a supplier for the first time. This finding is consistent with Rheingold (1993), who argues that community infrastructure which includes bulletin boards and chats rooms provide virtual meeting places where consumers can explore common interests and in some instances, develop a shared identity. In this research, this point has been fully borne out.

Due to the complicated diplomatic situation in which Taiwan finds itself, Taiwanese people need to apply for a visitor visa to travel to some countries. Each country requires different travel documents such as a bank statement, travel plan or a letter of and it takes from two days to a week to get a visa issued. However, these requirements, fees and the address of the embassy change from time to time. All consumers mentioned the fact that they visit the websites and follow the instructions before applying for a visitor visa. In this respect, the websites provide a convenient service. Consumers do not need to visit each embassy website and get the same information. Alternatively, online travel agencies can apply for a visa or renew a passport if consumers need this service. Consumers can make reservations by simply filling out forms (e.g. applications for visitor visas and first time applications or renewals for passports) which can be downloaded from the websites. They simply have to follow the website instructions which clearly state the required documents, fees, working days and choice of delivery. The company will then undertake the rest of the process.

4.5 CONVENIENCE RESULTING FROM THE TECHNOLOGY

It has been discovered that travel agents use at least two modern kinds of technology to interact with consumers in order to achieve perceived convenience and efficiency. The research reveals several types of technology popularly applied in the travel industry. The first is the email message. All consumers receive at least three email messages during each transaction. The three email messages consumers receive are a personalised email, a payment reminder and a notification that the products have been dispatched. The last email message is especially important for consumers because their expectations for the length of a wait affect their willingness to accept the wait and their assessment of service convenience. The email message indicates the date and the manner of delivery, giving consumers the security of perceived control over the whole situation. These findings correspond to Berry et al (2002)
and Yen and Gwinner’s (2003) studies in service convenience and Internet retail customer loyalty respectively. Moreover, consumers may receive more than three emails depending on the complexity of products being purchased. Some consumers keep all email messages in case a failure occurs. These email messages can be used as evidences if needed. Others rarely check their emails, suggesting that such messages have a low impact on their perceptions of convenience.

The second type is the text message. Some consumers point out that two or three travel agencies will send them text messages to give them updates. The advantage of this type of technology is that it can deliver real-time information to the consumers who are able to control the whole position. Take the case of one interviewed consumer, who almost missed her flight because the boarding time was changed. She was very grateful for the instant message; otherwise, she would have missed her holiday. The third type is the mobile phone. One consumer recounted her experience. When she was in Malaysia last year, her return flight was cancelled suddenly. Luckily, she had her mobile with her and the travel agent was able to inform her and arranged the next available return flight. The findings reveal one important point here. When a service failure is incurred, the travel agencies plays a role as a mediator trying to solve and recover the problem, even though is may be due to the airline company. Therefore, the relationship between customers and travel agencies does not end at the point of each transaction. The constant and careful customer service offered by humanity is the key which makes consumers feel convenience and secured, even though technology may support this role.

Finally, the newest type of technology is MSN messenger. One consumer, who has a boyfriend in the States, flies there at least four times a year. She has a close relationship with a particular online travel agent. When she needs to contact the travel agent, she does not need to phone. She checks her MSN list to see whether or not the travel agent is online and sends an instant message. As the travel agent may be answering a telephone call at that moment, they can still communicate and she can make her purchase. To sum up the major characteristics of the convenience received from technology, no matter which type companies use, technology brings more opportunities for interaction and improves the quality of service. It is the key factor in consumers’ decision to revisit the websites in the future.

5. CONCLUSION

The paper has been concerned with the concept of e-service convenience from the consumer’s perspective in relation to purchasing tourism products online. The Internet represents a recent technological innovation that has had a profound impact on the convenience of people’s lives.
The travel industry has consistently been identified as one industry likely to be affected most by the advantage of the Internet. Travel usually rates among the top products purchased via the Internet. Previous empirical research on convenience or convenience-oriented consumption research has yielded weak results. The findings suggest that consumers’ immediate travel requirements are satisfied, leaving them with time and energy for other things. In the electronic marketplace, consumers are able to use self-service technology to make the procurement and delivery of goods and services that fit their needs in terms of convenience. The findings indicate that the Internet enables consumers to make substantial time and effort saving in purchasing tourism products in Taiwan.

Preliminary findings of convenience reveal a uni-dimensional construct. As Gehrt and Yale (1993) found convenience includes three dimensions: temporal, spatial and effort dimensions. In this research, it has been proved that control and technology dimensions have a positive influence on consumer perceptions of convenience. This finding is in line with Wolfinbarger and Gilly’s (2000) research which concluded that control and freedom underlie the concept of convenience. The research fully bears out the point and clearly illustrates the importance of control and security in purchasing perishable products in the tourism industry. This paper also identifies some interesting issues that could be further addressed. It apparently a great deal in studying e-service convenience phenomenon in terms of theory and practice.

6. REFERENCES


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