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This document is a working paper, summarizing a presentation at a conference. It was delivered at the SAICSIT 2012 Academic Conference in Irene, Pretoria, South Africa, at the Masters & Doctoral Symposium. The abstract has been reviewed and accepted, and the paper has been edited for basic grammar and accuracy. Kindly consider this document as a working paper, to be used for basic referencing. It could be useful for research in the field of Website Usability and HCI.

Cape Town hotel reservation system usability

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Subject: Website Usability

ABSTRACT

The aim of this research project is to determine the degree of usability of Cape Town hotel online reservation systems.

Literature has shown that the goal of website usability is to improve website efficiency and enjoyableness. Researchers note that good content, simple design and few grammatical errors establish trust in a website. It has also been proven that poor website design results in loss of potential sales due to users being unable to find what they want.

The research instrument that will be used in this research is a usability test. The research will focus on web-based reservation systems, and only usability will be measured. In this research project, both standard approaches in user testing will be used - quantitative and qualitative testing.

The outcome of this study will be used to guide the improvement of the usability of Web-based hotel reservation systems.

1.   Introduction

During the past two decades the growth of the Internet and the expansion of public access to this medium have strengthened the practice of conducting business online and has been the centre of attention for investors and executives in most industries. The Internet, especially the search function, has had a great impact on the hotel industry (Buhalis and Law, 2008). The fast growth in the number of users of hotel online reservation systems and the increased rate of hotel online transactions provide clear evidence of the popularity of these systems (Law, Qi & Buhalis, 2010). Many hotel companies use the Internet as a tool to generate revenue and competition is always at a high level (Buhalis, 2004). However, the potential competitive advantages transform into real advantages only if the websites are well designed. Buhalis (2004) indicates that information completeness and ease of use are important determinants of hotel website usability.

Since information-rich websites are a major contributing factor to the high growth rate of e-commerce in the tourism industry, there is a need for hotel companies to strive for a competitive advantage by designing their websites to meet the preferences of users (Yu, 2008). Researchers show that usable websites are more likely to draw visits and business from users (Shchiglik & Barnes, 2004). This research will focus on the measurement of the usability of Cape Town hotel web-based booking systems and will provide hotel managers and Web developers with an understanding of website usability.

2.   Other research

2.1   Research problem

Poor website design results in a loss of potential sales due to users being unable to find what they want and a loss of potential repeat visits due to an initial negative experience (Coniffer, 2000). Van der Merwe and Bekker (2003) mentioned that websites which do not provide a positive experience may cause customers to decide that it is easier to go to the physical store than to purchase online. Kearney (2001) showed that 82% of users attempted to purchase goods online but gave up as a result of poor design and usability of websites.

A hotel's image has become more important than a shop front (Liang and Law, 2003). Some of the information on their websites include irrelevant information, or is arranged in an illogical order. Some hotel websites are not updated regularly and the outdated information may eventually be negative for the hotel's image (Chung and Law, 2003). Jeong, Oh & Gregoire (2003) claimed that developing and maintaining an effective website is critical to the success of the business. Some hotels are faking reviews and provide misleading information which increase booking volume in the short-term, but eventually leads to low perceived value and even more negative reviews which tarnishes the hotel image in the long term (Muller, 2011).

Stringam and Gerdes (2010) have been doing research about the effect of the use (or lack of) graphic images on hotel websites in general. This study also confirmed the ongoing importance of high usability on this kind of website. The importance of research on hotel interfaces was confirmed (Srikanth & Kutay 2009) in a study done on the difference between single screen and multi-screen booking interfaces. The

findings suggested that the general quality of hotel booking websites is low. Other research (Wei, Cheung & Law 2010) into online hotel booking systems has proven that user demographics need to be considered in the design of these systems. Ignoring this factor could lead to loss of income as a result of fewer bookings.

This confirms the importance of proper design and usability considerations in hotel booking systems. Based on this prior research, it has become clear that the research problem is that a lack of usability of online hotel booking systems deter potential clients from spending money at hotels.

2.2   Research Question

- Do users find hotel online reservation system usable?

2.2.1 Research sub-questions

- How much time do hotel website users spend on reservation systems?
- What are the main usability impediments on hotel website reservation systems?

2.3   Methodology

In this research it is appropriate to use both qualitative and quantitative approaches in user testing. A quantitative research approach signifies the use of numbers to explain and predict a phenomenon. It is representative and can be conducted on a large sample. A qualitative research approach is used to gain insight into people's attitudes, behaviors, value systems, concerns, motivations, aspirations, cultures or lifestyle. Hotels in Western Cape were initally selected for user testing, but due to the sheer volume it had to be narrowed to Cape Town only. Even this number was too high, so the sample was further reduced to being just hotels in the Cape Town CBD area. This yielded a total of 52 hotels (three stars and above, B&B's and Guest Houses excluded). It was also noted that some hotels used the same generic booking system (eg www.booking.com or www.hotels.com), and measuring the same booking system twice would be wasteful. Hence, every cluster of hotels using the same reservation system had to be reduced to only one hotel - the decision was taken to choose, in each case, the first hotel listed alphabetically from each cluster. This yielded a random selection from each cluster. The result of this process is

shown in Table 1.

The user testing will involve a number of participants, using a number of hotel websites to attempt to make a reservation for accommodation. They will record their experience as they progress, and will terminate the process the moment they are asked to make a payment for their booking.

Selected Cape Town Hotels with ORS, 3 star +		
List of Hotel in Cape Town	Hotel Homepage	Star Rating
Adderley Hotel	http://adderley.ahagroup.co.za/	4
Best Western Cape Suite Hotel	http://www.capesuites.co.za/	3
Breakwater Lodge	http://www.bwl.co.za/	3
Cape Castle	http://www.proteahotels.com/protea-hotel-cape-castle-waterfront.html	3
Cape Sun	http://www.capesunhotel.i-res.co/	5
Cape Milner	http://www.south-african-hotels.com/hotels/cape-milner-hotel/	5
Cape Diamond Hotel	http://www.capediamondhotel.co.za/	3
Cape Grace	http://www.capegrace.com/	5
Cape Heritage Hotel	http://www.capeheritage.co.za/	4
Cape Royale	http://www.caperoyale.co.za/	5
CT Hollow	http://www.capetownhollow.co.za/	4
CT Lodge	http://www.capetownlodge.co.za/	4
Circa Hotel	http://www.circahotel.co.za/	4
City Lodge	https://www.citylodge.co.za/cl10.php	4
Cullinan Hotel	http://www.tsogosunhotels.com/hotels/the-cullinan/pages/overview.aspx	4
15 On Orange	http://www.south-african-hotels.com/hotels/15-on-orange-hotel/	4
North Wharf	http://www.booking.com/hotel/za/protea-north-wharf.en.html	5
Fire And Ice	http://www.proteahotels.com/protea-hotel-fire-ice-cape-town.html	4
Fountain Hotel	http://www.booking.com/hotel/za/fountains.en.html	3
Graeme Hotel	http://www.sa-venues.com/visit/hotelgraeme/	4
Grand Daddy	http://www.granddaddy.co.za/	4
Garden Court	http://www.tsogosunhotels.com/garden-court/pages/home.aspx	4
Hollow On The	http://www.hollowonthesquare.co.za/	3

Square		
Hilton Hotel	http://www.south-african-hotels.com/hotels/hilton-cape-town-city-centre/	4
Harbour Bridge Hotel	http://harbourbridge.ahagroup.co.za/	4
Holiday Inn Express	http://www.hiexhotels.co.za/	4
Head South	http://www.agoda.com/africa/south_africa/cape_town/head_south_lodge.html	4
Icon Hotel	http://www.urbanhiphotels.com/our-hotel-accommodation/icon-hotel	4
Kimberly Hotel	http://www.hostels.com/hostels/cape-town/kimberley-hotel-back-packers/20337	3
Lady Hamilton Hotel	http://www.ladyhamilton.co.za/	4
Mount Nelson Luxury Hotel	http://www.mountnelson.co.za/web/ocap/contact_us.jsp	5
More Quarters	http://www.morequarters.co.za/	4
New Tulbagh	http://newtulbaghhotel.com/	3
Pepper Club Luxury Hotel Spa	http://www.pepperclub.co.za/	4
Parliament	http://parliamenthotel.co.za/	3
Portswood	http://www.portswood.co.za/	3
Park Inn	http://www.parkinn.com/	4
Radisson Blue Hotel	http://www.radissonblu.com/hotel-capetown	5
Rommey Park	http://www.romneypark.co.za/	5
Rockwell	http://www.rockwellhotel.co.za/	4
Saaveld	http://www.saasveldlodge.co.za/	3
St George Hotel	http://www.hotelonstgeorges.co.za/	4
Strand Tower	http://www.strandtowerhotel.co.za/	4
Tulip	http://www.thetulip.co.za/	3
Table Bay Hotel	http://www.south-african-hotels.com/hotels/table-bay-hotel-cape-town/	5
Tudor	http://www.venere.com/hotels/cape-town/hotel-tudor/	4
The One 8	http://www.theone8.com/	4
The Fritz	http://www.fritzhotel.co.za/	3
The Commodore	http://www.thecommodore.co.za/	4
Victoria and Alfred Hotel	http://www.newmarkhotels.com/hotels/victoria-alfred-hotel/	4
The Westin Grand	http://www.westincapetown.com/	5

Table 1: Selected Cape Town hotels

2.4 Potential results

Previous research has shown (see Figure 1), that the more problems users have with usability, the more users navigate away as a result of the nagetive experience.
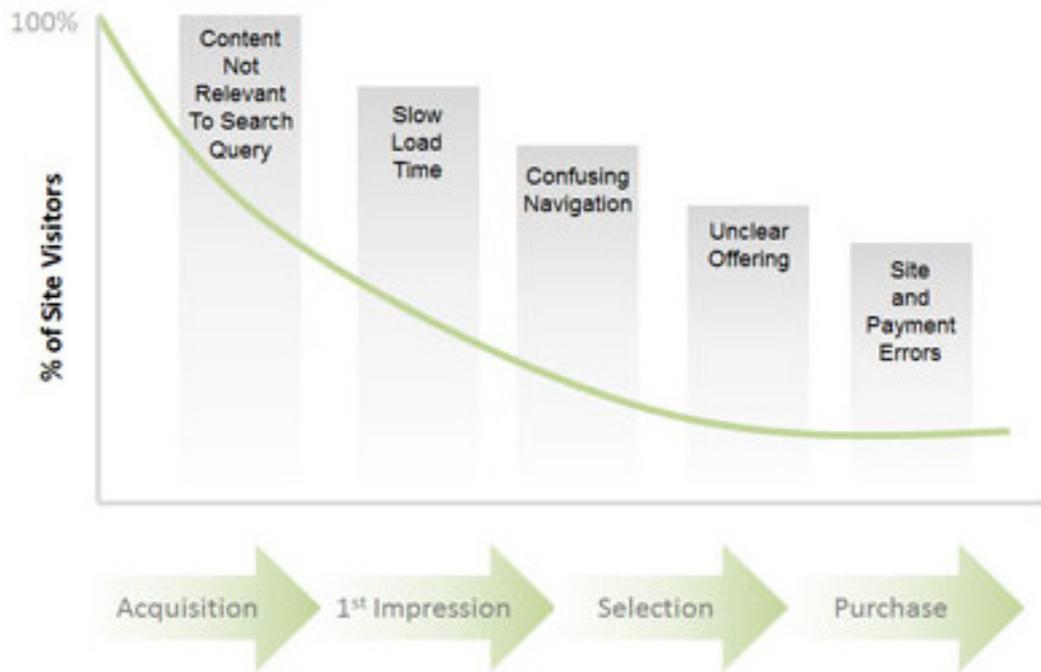

Figure 1: Key tips for better website usability (Jones, 2011).

Jones (2011) note that a top website that is loaded with good content but is not converting, could lose most of the visitors within the first 60 seconds. This study was done on a flight booking website , and proves the importance of website usability.

2.5 Conclusion

The outcomes of this study will be used to improve the usability of web-based hotel booking systems that currently lead to a loss of potential repeat visits due to initial negative experiences. Future research could be done to implement factors affecting usability of hotel web-based reservation systems. It can also provide hotel managers and Web developers with an understanding of website usability impact on user satisfaction.

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