

Online marketing strategies for community-based tourism in the Andaman cluster of Thailand

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Goal and objectives of the dissertation

Goal

Community-based tourism (CBT) is an alternative segment of the tourism industry that contributes to the sustainability of the environment, socio-culture, and economy (Dodds, Ali, & Galaski, 2018; Dolezal, 2015; Giampiccoli & Saayman, 2016). The goal of this study was to implement online marketing strategies for CBT destinations in five provinces along the west coastal lines of the Andaman sea in Thailand, including Phuket, Phang Nga, Krabi, Trang, and Satun provinces. Many local communities in this cluster have established CBT and have operated its activities for years, but they have remained unknown to tourists. While CBT continued to grow in Thailand, essential online marketing strategies were still limited, impractical, and have not been put into practice by many local entrepreneurs within the CBT communities.

Objectives

In order to accomplish the primary goal, the objectives of this study are as follows:

- To analyse the current online marketing situations of CBT destinations in the Andaman cluster of Thailand.
- To classify segments of CBT tourists.
- To investigate online marketing factors influencing CBT tourists' intentions to visit the Andaman cluster destinations.
- To initiate effective online marketing strategies for CBT destinations in the Andaman cluster of Thailand.

Methodology

A mixed-method approach, including both quantitative and qualitative methods, was applied in this study. The quantitative method was used to classify segments of tourists visiting CBT destinations and to investigate online marketing factors influencing their intention to visit. The survey instrument was adapted from previous research and distributed to 419 Thai Freely Independent Travelers (FITs) who had visited CBT destinations in Thailand before. The link to an online self-administered questionnaire was shared with potential respondents via social media sites and online discussion platforms, and yielded 384 completed responses. Data was analysed using cluster analysis to identify segments of CBT tourists. Multiple regression analysis was also applied to explore online marketing factors that influence tourists' intention to visit CBT destinations.

A qualitative method was adopted to examine the current online marketing situation of CBT destinations in the Andaman cluster of Thailand and to initiate online marketing strategies for these destinations. Fifteen CBT marketers from fifteen CBT destinations in the Andaman cluster were selected as participants. A semi-structured interview was conducted to determine the current online marketing situation. SWOT and content analyses were employed to interpret the interview data. Subsequently, the results of all three objectives were integrated and used as fundamental data for initiating effective online marketing strategies for the CBT destinations. The author further interviewed three online marketing experts with at least three years of CBT online marketing experience to verify these strategies. Content analysis of experts' opinions was also adopted to finalize the proposed strategies.

Results

Regarding the first objective, the study found that current online marketing situations of CBT destinations in the Andaman cluster of Thailand included a lack of marketing and technology experts, a lack of effective online marketing content, and inefficient use of online marketing channels. These flaws were challenging as they reduced local communities' and entrepreneurs' ability to connect to the

right target market effectively. Nevertheless, many opportunities within the destinations could help them overcome these weaknesses and lead to successful online marketing.

For the second objective, three segments of CBT tourists were identified regarding their travel motivation. These include 'cultural tourists,' 'leisure tourists,' and 'explorer tourists.' Among the three segments, the findings demonstrated that their socio-demographic profiles and travel motivations were significantly different. However, we found a slight difference in their online behaviors. The 'explorer tourists' segment showed high interest in all travel motivation factors including enjoying local nature, gaining new experience, learning local culture, and building a strong family relationship. The 'cultural tourists' segment was motivated by factors related to learning and experiencing the locals and the 'leisure tourists' segment had the lowest interest among all travel motivational factors. For the tourists' socio-demographic profile, the 'cultural tourists' segment was significantly different from the other two segments. In addition, this segment of tourists tended to use information from online resources to prepare for a trip more than the other two segments, whereas the 'explorer tourists' segment was more active in using online resources during and after the trip than those tourists of other segments.

Results of the third objective showed that system quality, electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM), and quality of design and service had positive influences on CBT tourists' intentions to visit the Andaman cluster destinations. Contrastingly, the effects of information quality and security on tourists' intention to visit were insignificant. E-WOM was an important source of information that CBT tourists could trust and guide their travel decision-making. System quality and the quality of design and service were also crucial as they allowed the tourists to effectively decide which CBT destinations were worth visiting and suited their needs the most.

Finally, the online marketing strategies were formulated based on the results draw upon all three objectives, and the 'cultural tourists' segment was selected as the target market. These tourists primarily visited a CBT destination to learn and experience locals' lives and relax in beautiful nature. Therefore, they would likely enjoy the CBT's true value and understand how to behave themselves while visiting a CBT destination. They would be also less likely to create negative impacts and contribute to the sustainability of CBT.

We proposed two key online marketing strategies. The first strategy focused on integrated marketing all necessary online tools including websites, social media, search engines, e-WOM, blogs and contents, and location-based apps. The marketing strategy using these online tools must be well integrated in order to achieve the best results. The second strategy focused on the capability enhancement that aimed to improve CBT marketers' capabilities in implementing an integrated online marketing strategy. This strategy was comprised of tourist database management and the MCGA online marketing team in which M stands for a marketer, C stands for a content creator, G stands for a graphic designer, and A stands for an administrator. Three online marketing experts have verified the proposed online marketing strategies. The study concluded that these strategies were appropriate and practical for the CBT marketers in the Andaman tourism cluster to implement further and they would allow the CBT marketers to reach the target markets more effectively.

Theoretical conclusions

The study demonstrated that although CBT was niche tourism, tourists were encouraged to participate in CBT by different travel motivations. This result proved that travel motivations could classify CBT tourist segments. Besides travel motivation, the CBT tourists' socio-demographic profiles and some of

their online behaviors were also significantly different. This study also affirmed that e-WOM, system quality, and quality of design and service directly influenced tourists' intention to visit CBT destinations.

Practical application of the dissertation

The knowledge discovered from this study would enable CBT marketers to reach the right target markets and enhance online marketing strategies efficiently. CBT marketers should thoroughly consider travel motivations to encourage tourists to visit CBT destinations. Tourists were motivated to visit a CBT destination by either local culture, beautiful nature, exciting activity, or the opportunity to participate together with a family. Due to the differences of CBT tourists, the CBT marketers must select the right target markets and deliver products, services and design of online marketing strategies that are suitable for each target market.

Besides, various strategic techniques and incentives should encourage CBT tourists to generate positive e-WOM because most tourists relied on this information source and they considered it as trustworthy. The system of the online channels should be easy to access and navigate throughout the source. The appealing media design, content and sources, and high-quality online service were also critical as these factors could positively influence tourists to visit a CBT destination.

Regarding the initiated online marketing strategies, CBT marketers should consider choosing the online marketing and capability enhancement strategies to implement on CBT destinations before continuing to the next steps. As CBT marketers were limited with capabilities and resources in managing their online marketing, government agencies and other organizations should collaborate and support the CBT marketers to help enhance their capabilities to operate online marketing effectively, allowing them to reach the right target markets.

Content of the dissertation

Abstract of Chapter 1

An introductory chapter discussed this study's background, particularly in government tourism policies, tourism trends, CBT, online marketing strategies, details of problem identification, and research gap. This chapter also stated research questions, research objectives, scope of the study, definition of key terms, research contributions, and structure of the study.

Abstract of Chapter 2

This chapter discussed previous literature on CBT, marketing communication, online marketing, tourists' online behavior, market segmentation, and online marketing factors that influence tourists' intention to visit a CBT destination. This chapter provided support, argument, and knowledge about the initiation of online marketing strategies.

Abstract of Chapter 3

This chapter presented the research methodology which included both quantitative and qualitative methods. It explained the conceptual research framework, unit of analysis, research methods with the details of population, sample size, sampling techniques, research tools, data collection, data analysis, and ethical issues in this research.

Abstract of Chapter 4

This chapter presented data analysis and results using qualitative and statistical methods to answer research questions and achieve research objectives. The results demonstrated that the CBT marketers in the Andaman clusters were unable to perform online marketing effectively due to various factors.

This study also categorized CBT tourists into three segments by differentiating their travel motivations. The three segments include 'cultural tourists', 'leisure tourists', and 'explorer tourists.' The results confirmed that e-WOM, system quality, and quality of design and service significantly influenced the CBT tourists' intention to visit the destinations, whereas information quality and security were not significant. The results were discussed and used for initiating online marketing strategies in chapter five.

Abstract of Chapter 5

This chapter explained how this study fulfilled the gap in online marketing literature in the CBT context. All three research objectives were integrated into this chapter and used to initiate online marketing strategies for CBT destinations in the Andaman cluster. However, this study also had some limitations in which future researchers who wish to carry out similar studies should consider. Some interesting future research topics were also suggested to extend the knowledge in this subject.

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