Exploring factors influencing service quality of online travel agencies: A politeness perspective

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Abstract

As the internet becomes more widespread, competition among online travel platforms has intensified. To succeed, platforms must understand how to attract and retain customers. This study, based on the theory of e-commerce politeness, employs the critical incident technique to collect customer feedback regarding politeness on online travel platforms, identifying key factors in both satisfactory and unsatisfactory user experiences. This study collected a total of 76 valid questionnaires, with 76 instances of satisfaction and 76 instances of dissatisfaction. Satisfactory incidents fall into categories such as discounts and promotions, precise push notifications, ticket purchasing channels, system functionality, and customer service quality. Unsatisfactory incidents include price stability, refund and exchange policies, advertising frequency, review mechanisms, system functionality, and customer service quality. The study confirms that these critical incidents significantly impact the service quality of online travel platforms. Finally, practical recommendations are proposed based on these findings, aiming to offer valuable insights for the development of online travel platforms and to enrich theoretical research on consumer behavior. The study presents a novel and timely exploration of e-commerce politeness in the context of online travel agencies (OTAs), filling a gap in existing research.

Keywords: Online travel agencies; e-commerce politeness; critical incident technique; service quality; user experience

1. Introduction

Following the COVID-19 pandemic, China has experienced a sustained tourism boom. Whether it's "special forces" tours, the popularity of Zibo barbecue, the tourism fever in Harbin, or the fully booked tourist attractions during every holiday, these phenomena all indicate people's enthusiasm for travel. With the widespread use of the internet, people no longer need to buy tickets or book hotels face-to-face, nor do they need paper maps to obtain information about attractions. The prevalence of online travel agencies has greatly facilitated people's travel by providing functions such as information inquiries, reservations, price comparisons, and payments. As a tool for travelers, there are now numerous online travel agencies available. Previous studies have extensively discussed the usability and usefulness of these agencies, but there has been less focus on them from the perspective of e-commerce politeness. Therefore, this study explores the customer service quality and user experience of online travel agencies based on e-commerce politeness. In social norms, politeness in interpersonal communication is key to gaining trust and maintaining good relationships. Similarly, in the interaction between customers and agencies, the politeness of the online travel agency is crucial to gaining customer trust and increasing customer loyalty, as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Interaction Diagram of online travel agencies Based on E-commerce Politeness
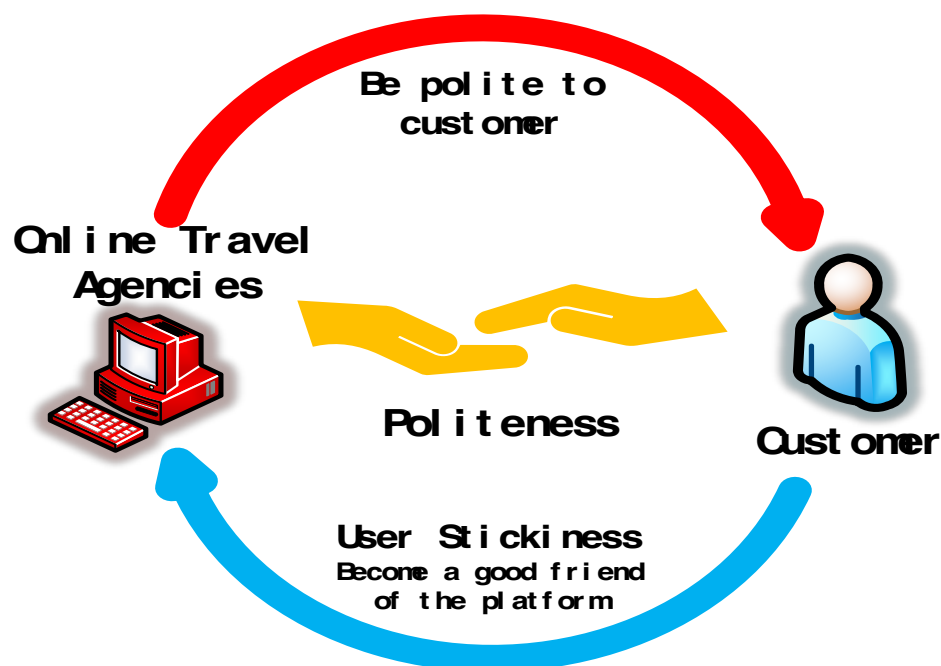
However, in the current interactions between customers and online travel agencies, there inevitably exist both polite and impolite incidents. Customers' perceptions of politeness are closely related to the factors that influence the service quality of online travel platforms. This study employs the critical incident technique, a qualitative research method, to collect customer satisfaction and dissatisfaction incidents related to politeness on online travel agencies. The aim is to explore the current needs of customers regarding online travel agencies and provide effective recommendations for their development.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Online Travel Agencies

Online travel agencies have always been a hot topic of research. Currently, the competition among major online travel agencies is becoming increasingly fierce, and gaining customer favor has become the key to winning the competition. Exploring how to attract and retain customers can provide valuable references for various online travel agencies. Wan Jasni et al. (2020) pointed out that the overall service quality of online travel agencies is positively correlated with customers' purchase intentions on these agencies. The research by Min and Lee (2020) has demonstrated that the ease of use of online travel agencies is no longer a factor of customer satisfaction, whereas gaining customer trust is the most important factor for retaining customers. Moreover, many customers now compare different travel agencies to choose the one with the most satisfactory prices, services, and packages. Customer trust in online travel agencies significantly affects their willingness to continue using them, which is crucial for improving customer stickiness (Lee & Min, 2021). Ray and Bala's (2021) research highlighted that favorable prices and customer trust are important influencing factors for the willingness of customers to use online travel agencies. Currently, the most criticized issue with online travel platforms is price discrimination based on big data. In China, this means that merchants use big data to collect customers' consumption habits and preferences, and after algorithmic analysis, prices will continue to rise as the number of views increases. This phenomenon can negatively impact users' perception of fairness and lead them to view the platform as impolite or disrespectful. In addition, this study aims to explore the issues that online travel platforms can still improve upon and the factors that contribute to retaining customers.

2.2 E-Commerce Politeness

The earliest theoretical exploration of politeness was in the field of social psychology (Goffman, 1967). Later, this concept was extended to the field of computing, integrating computers into social norms requiring politeness (Reeves & Nass, 1996). Recently, the concept of politeness has also been applied in human-computer interaction (Whitworth, 2005), allowing for a more systematic understanding of the significance of machine politeness in human-machine interactions. Whitworth and Liu (2008) pointed out that a polite computer environment can make human-

computer interactions more pleasant, while a rude environment can be off-putting. Ribino (2023) noted that during human-computer interactions, robots that exhibit polite behavior are more likely to gain trust and increase social acceptance. Kumar et al. (2022) demonstrated through experiments that machines displaying more polite behavior are more likely to gain users' trust. Smith et al. (2022) argued that for robots to be widely accepted, they must adhere to social norms, which include politeness. When people use computers, they frequently interact with various types of software. The system functionalities and online commercial environments of these software applications are also important research areas that can be explored from the perspective of politeness, known as e-commerce politeness (Chen & Hu, 2017). The importance of politeness to e-commerce platforms has been confirmed (Chen & Huang, 2025). Previous research has primarily focused on politeness in pure human-computer interaction. However, with the rapid development of e-commerce, many computer software applications now include online transaction functions. E-commerce differs from pure computing functionality as it combines computing functions with commercial transactions in an online commercial environment. There is currently limited research on e-commerce politeness. Therefore, this study explores the factors affecting customer service quality on online travel agencies based on e-commerce politeness.

2.3 Critical Incident Technique

This study employs the Critical Incident Technique (CIT), a qualitative research method. The Critical Incident Technique was initially used as an analysis technique to evaluate performance through critical incidents in the workplace and was later extended to various fields, with its reliability being confirmed. The process involves researchers collecting positive and negative critical incidents, categorizing them according to incident attributes, and then having three experienced raters validate the classifications. The analysis of the classification results is then conducted to interpret the management implications (Flanagan, 1954).

As a research method, the Critical Incident Technique is widely applied in many fields, such as: addressing social justice issues in teaching practices by health and physical education teachers (Philpot et al., 2021); evaluating healthcare professionals' experiences with medication for the elderly (Holmqvist et al., 2021); assessing the impact of hotel interns' experiences on overall internships (Nguyen et al., 2023); handling autistic children in high-tech environments by healthcare providers (Pettersson et al., 2024); identifying critical points of supplier satisfaction in a seller's market (Janssens et al., 2023); the impact of library and information management on patient care and clinical decision-making (Sadeghi et al., 2022). As indicated above, the Critical Incident Technique is mature and stable. Therefore, this study uses the Critical Incident Technique to investigate customer service quality on online travel agencies.

3. Research Design

The main objective of this study is to explore the politeness performance of online travel agencies

in an e-commerce environment. Between December 23, 2024, and January 9, 2025, researchers collected data from customers who had used online travel platforms by distributing questionnaires via social media apps such as Xiaohongshu and WeChat, using the Wenjuanxing platform. Participants were asked to report experiences of both polite and impolite incidents encountered on online travel platforms. The collected data was analyzed using the Critical Incident Technique. This study employed random sampling, and all respondents were from China. The researchers categorized the critical incidents based on their attributes and validated their reliability and validity. The results of the study reflect customers' needs for the service quality of online travel agencies, providing new insights for the development of these agencies. The questions for this study are as follows:

Question 1: Please describe the most satisfying, happiest, most respectful, or politest critical incident you have experienced while using an online travel agency.

Question 2: Please describe the most unsatisfying, unhappiest, most disrespectful, or rudest critical incident you have experienced while using an online travel agency.

Additionally, the questions also address customer suggestions for improvement in cases of dissatisfaction and investigate the willingness to use the online travel agency after improvements, providing reference suggestions for enhancing customer service quality on the online travel agency.

4. Data Analysis

4.1 Basic Information

A total of 108 questionnaires were collected in this study. After excluding 32 invalid questionnaires that were incomplete or off-topic, there were 76 valid questionnaires, comprising 76 satisfactory and 76 unsatisfactory incidents, resulting in a total of 152 incidents. The gender distribution of the respondents shows that 55 were female, accounting for 72%, and 21 were male, accounting for 28%, with a majority being female. This gender distribution may have influenced the research findings. The age distribution of the respondents covers all age groups, with the majority being 19-24 years old, totaling 43 respondents, or 56.5%. This was followed by the 35-44 age group with 6 respondents, or 21.0%, and the 25-34 age group with 14 respondents, or 18.4%. In terms of the respondents' spending levels, the most common range was below 3000-yuan, accounting for 57.8%, indicating that the majority are low-spending consumers.

4.2 Detailed Classification

In the 76 valid questionnaires collected, researchers categorized the incidents based on their attributes. The satisfactory incidents were divided into five categories, while the unsatisfactory incidents were divided into six categories. Customer service quality and system functionality were among the common classifications. The specific classification definitions are shown in Table 1:

Table 1. Names and Definitions of Incident Classifications

Satisfactory Incident Classification	Satisfactory Incident Definition	Dissatisfaction Incident Classification	Dissatisfaction Incident Definition
System Functionality	Functions such as itinerary reminders, payment, location services, login, interface buttons, complaints, etc. provided by the online travel agency (including satisfaction/dissatisfaction)		
Customer Service Quality	The attitude, response speed, and after-sales handling during the process of agency customer service assisting customers (including satisfaction/dissatisfaction)		
Discounts and Promotions	Whether the online travel agency provides any discounts or promotional prices when purchasing goods or services	Price Stability	Whether the price remains consistent regardless of when the customer searches for the same destination repeatedly
Precise Push Notifications	Recommending content or products that match customer preferences through the collection and analysis of customer data	Return and Exchange Policies	Issues arising from various return and exchange problems after customers receive goods and services
Ticket Purchasing Channels	Allowing customers to purchase the tickets they need	Ad Frequency	The fatigue experienced by customers after encountering a large volume of advertisements on a particular online travel agency
--	--	Review Mechanisms	Whether the online travel agency regulation is adequate and whether there are issues such as mismatched goods or false advertising

4.3 Reliability Testing

4.3.1 Reliability

According to Keaveny's (1995) theory, when the consistency of researchers' individual classification results reaches 0.8 or above, the classification results are considered reliable. In this study, researchers first categorized the collected satisfactory and unsatisfactory incidents based on their attributes. Three raters, who were informed about the researchers' classification definitions, then performed the classifications. To prevent memory interference, the raters conducted a second classification two weeks later. The three raters in this study were managers and technical personnel from online travel agency enterprises and university teachers specializing in tourism management, all of whom possess certain knowledge and experience in relevant fields, ensuring the validity of the classifications. After the classification process, data analysis showed that, as reflected in Table 2, the consistency among Rater 1, Rater 2, and Rater 3 for satisfactory incidents was 0.92, 0.86, and 0.88, respectively. For unsatisfactory incidents, the consistency was 0.9, 0.88, and 0.92, respectively. All values exceeded 0.8, indicating that the consistency of individual classifications in this study has a certain degree of reliability.

Table 2. Number of Individual Classification Consistencies

Classifier	Classifier 1	Classifier 2	Classifier 3	Classifier1	Classifier2	Classifier3
Incident	Satisfaction	Satisfaction	Satisfaction	Dissatisfaction	Dissatisfaction	Dissatisfaction
Number of Same Incidents	70	66	67	69	67	70
Total Incidents	76	76	76	76	76	76
Consistency	0.92	0.86	0.88	0.90	0.88	0.92

Due to the influence of raters' subjective awareness during the classification process, it is necessary to verify the inter-rater consistency even after completing the reliability validation of individual classification consistency, to ensure the credibility of the research. This study employs Holsti's (1969) reliability analysis method to verify inter-rater consistency, and the formula is as follows:

$$R = \frac{(N \times A)}{1 + [(N-1) \times A]} \quad (1)$$

$$A = \frac{\frac{2M_{12}}{n_1+n_2}+\frac{2M_{23}}{n_2+n_3}+\frac{2M_{13}}{n_1+n_3}}{N} \quad (2)$$

Through data analysis, the number of mutually consistent incidents classified as satisfactory and unsatisfactory by the raters, as shown in Table 3, was obtained. The average inter-rater consistency for satisfactory incidents is 0.820, with a classification reliability of 0.932, while the average inter-rater consistency for unsatisfactory incidents is 0.846, with a classification reliability of 0.950. The inter-rater reliability in this study reached above 0.8, indicating that the study has a certain degree of reliability.

Table 3. Number of Inter-rater Consistencies

Consistency	Classifier 1	Classifier 2	Classifier 3	Classifier1	Classifier2	Classifier3
Number	Satisfaction	Satisfaction	Satisfaction	Dissatisfaction	Dissatisfaction	Dissatisfaction
Classifier1	76	--	--	76	--	--
Classifier2	61	76	--	64	76	--
Classifier3	64	62	76	65	68	76

4.3.2 Validity

Validity refers to whether the measurement method can accurately reflect the capability of the object being measured, meaning the degree of similarity between the measured value and the true value. The research method adopted in this study is the Critical Incident Technique, a qualitative research method. Since its proposal by Flanagan, it has been continuously developed to reflect the depth and breadth of research questions, meeting the expected goals of the study. Therefore, this study possesses content validity. Additionally, the study's questions were revised by two professors from the field of management, reflecting expert opinions on the overall research, indicating that this study has a certain degree of expert validity (Hardesty & Bearden, 2004).

4.4 Classification Results

In this study, satisfactory incidents were divided into five categories, while unsatisfactory incidents were divided into six categories. Each category contains typical representative incidents. Examples of these incidents can be seen in Table 4 and Table 5:

Table 4. Examples of Positive Customer Incidents by Category

Categorized Terms	Example of Satisfactory Incident One	Example of Satisfactory Incident Two
Discounts and Promotions	After logging in and registering on the online travel agency, there is a travel subsidy. Also, please recommend some group tours that I can join.	When I think it's too expensive and don't want to make a purchase, proactively pop up a coupon for me.
Precise Push Notifications	The online travel agency offers personalized recommendations and customized services	After I search on the online travel agency, it will recommend hotels at my destination based on my needs
Ticket Purchasing Channels	Booking tickets on Trip.com can increase the chances of securing tickets	You can book tickets in advance, and once the tickets are released, the online travel agency will automatically attempt to secure them for you.
System Functionality	I am very satisfied with the feature on Trip.com that allows me to pay with a credit card.	I once forgot my departure time after booking a ticket on Tuniu, but the Tuniu app on my phone reminded me of the departure time. I am very satisfied with this feature.
Customer Service Quality	I booked a hotel on Trip.com, and when I needed to change the check-in date, I contacted customer service to explain the situation. The customer service representative was kind and patient, listened to my request carefully, and quickly helped me change the date without any hesitation.	When I needed to reschedule my ticket, the customer service representative explained the rescheduling process in detail, assisted me with the rescheduling, and thoughtfully informed me that I could contact them at any time if I had any further questions.

Table 5. Examples of Negative Customer Incidents by Category

Categorized Terms	Example of Unsatisfactory Incident One	Example of Unsatisfactory Incident Two
Price Stability	I initially used Fliggy, but while browsing, I noticed the page automatically refreshed. After that, the price for the same hotel and the same room types increased.	After frequently searching for flights to a certain destination, the prices kept increasing.
Return and Exchange Policies	I purchased a travel package on Fliggy, but due to a change in plans, I applied for a refund. Eighteen days later, I still hadn't received the actual refund, even though the order status showed that the refund was completed.	I booked a day tour product through Klook, but after the online travel agency forcibly canceled the order, Klook has not replied to my emails for nearly three months, and I have not received a refund to date.
Ad Frequency	Too many ads pop up during the use of the online travel agency.	Advertisements keep popping up, and it's difficult to press the close button to shut them off.
Review Mechanisms	The environment of Meituan homestays is significantly different from the pictures, completely mismatched.	Once, I booked a hostel on a online travel agency, and it was supposed to be a four-person room. However, when I arrived at night, I found out it was actually an eight-person room.
System Functionality	The Fliggy complaint agency is not very well developed; the complaint entry is hard to find, and there is no feedback window after submitting a complaint.	The buttons or key settings on the online travel agency are either not fully functional or not present at all.
Customer Service Quality	The Meituan agency staff lack professional skills and are unable to answer most questions.	All customer service representatives are automated bots that can't solve my problems, and transferring to a human representative is very troublesome.

Based on the five categories of satisfactory incidents and the six categories of unsatisfactory incidents, researchers calculated the average number of incidents categorized by the three raters.

Customer service quality ranked first for both satisfactory and unsatisfactory incidents, with 32 and 25 incidents, accounting for 42% and 32%, respectively, indicating the significant impact of customer service quality on consumers. System functionality ranked second for both satisfactory and unsatisfactory incidents, with 15 and 13 incidents, accounting for 20% and 17%, respectively. This suggests that online travel agency system functionality should not be impersonal but should have warmth and politeness to satisfy customers. The third, fourth, and fifth categories of satisfactory incidents were discounts and promotions, ticket purchasing channels, and personalized recommendations, with 12, 9, and 8 incidents, respectively. For unsatisfactory incidents, return and exchange policies ranked third, with 12 incidents, followed by price stability, review mechanisms, and advertisement frequency, with 11, 8, and 7 incidents, respectively.

Additionally, the study included a question asking respondents to suggest improvements after experiencing unsatisfactory incidents, allowing them to express their needs from the perspective of advisors. Many valuable suggestions were collected. Regarding willingness to use the online travel agency after improvements, 75% of customers expressed a willingness to use it again, while 25% indicated they would not continue using the online travel agency. Therefore, the agency must actively improve and avoid impolite incidents, and if such incidents occur, remedial actions should be taken promptly to retain customers.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

This study employed the Critical Incident Technique to investigate the factors influencing service quality on online travel platforms from the perspective of politeness, thereby expanding research in the field of e-commerce politeness related to online travel services and filling a gap in both domestic and international studies on politeness in online travel agencies. However, the technique's reliance on self-reported incidents and potential sampling bias introduces certain limitations to the study. Future research should delve deeper into this area through quantitative methods. The results of this study reveal that, apart from customer service quality, other incident categories also account for a certain proportion, indicating that customers have different standards for perceiving politeness on agencies. However, it is not difficult to improve customer satisfaction. The key is to approach it from the customer's perspective and meet their needs by adhering to politeness. While continuing to enhance aspects that satisfy customers, it is also essential to address points of dissatisfaction. This study offers the following six recommendations for improving service quality on online travel agencies:

(1) Reasonable Pricing to Retain Customer Profit: Develop differentiated pricing strategies for different customer groups. Offer exclusive discounts for premium customers to attract them to purchase membership services, thereby increasing customer loyalty. Provide appropriate discounts for price-sensitive customers to enhance customer stickiness. Strengthen price regulation for merchants to ensure price fluctuations are within reasonable ranges, avoiding exorbitant or unreasonable changes to maintain market order. Gradually reduce the online travel agency's

reliance on price discrimination to exploit loyal customers through fair and transparent pricing mechanisms to improve reputation and gain customer trust.

(2) Precise Push Notifications and Reduced Ad Frequency: Utilize big data algorithms and AI to deeply understand customer needs and deliver content that matches their preferences, increasing customer attention and satisfaction with push notifications. Reduce the frequency of pop-up ads, placing them on pages where customers can control their display. Prohibit the use of disruptive ads such as "shake and jump" ads and concealed ad close buttons to avoid negative customer experiences. Control ad display frequency to prevent excessive advertising from interfering with normal online travel agency use and to effectively alleviate customer ad fatigue.

(3) Improved Review Mechanisms to Protect Customer Rights: Require merchants to provide authentic and comprehensive product images and related information to prevent false advertising and fraud, ensuring consumers' right to know. Establish a robust penalty mechanism and clear complaint channels. Upon receiving customer complaints, swiftly order merchants to rectify issues and impose penalties, such as withholding deposits or fines, to protect customer rights. Encourage customers to report violations actively, offering rewards such as coupons for verified reports to foster customer participation. Guide customers to share genuine consumption experiences in the comment section to provide references for others and assist the online travel agency in monitoring merchant behavior, promoting service quality improvements.

(4) Enhanced Ticketing Channels to Meet Customer Needs: Ensure real-time updates of ticketing information so customers can access accurate booking information promptly. Implement intelligent tracking of booking information for customers to monitor their ticketing progress easily. Continuously strengthen the early automatic ticket snatching function to increase success rates through technological innovation, offering more opportunities for customers to purchase tickets. Prioritize data security and adopt effective measures to prevent information leaks and financial security risks, safeguarding customers' personal information and funds. Prohibit merchants from setting unreasonable policies, such as non-refundable and non-changeable bookings, providing flexible and convenient ticket modification and cancellation services.

(5) System Function Improvements Based on Customer Pain Points: Provide thoughtful travel reminders to ensure customers do not miss any important schedules. Diversify payment methods to cater to different customer groups, enhancing payment convenience and flexibility. Continuously refine interface design for a simpler and cleaner visual effect, and iteratively upgrade button positions based on customer needs to improve operability and user experience. Establish convenient complaint channels, simplify complaint processes, and ensure customers can quickly and effectively protect their rights.

(6) Customer First and Improved Customer Service Quality: Empower customers to choose the type of customer service they prefer, increase the number of human customer service

representatives to ensure customers receive professional service promptly. Enhance customer service team training to improve professional skills and service awareness, use polite language, listen to customer requests patiently, and genuinely help customers solve problems. Collect service evaluations and conduct online surveys to understand customer satisfaction with customer service and improvement suggestions promptly and respond and improve quickly. Utilize big data profiling to offer personalized service experiences, strengthen emotional connections with customers, and make them feel valued and cared for by the online travel agency.

Acknowledgments

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