



AN EXAMINATION OF FUTURE TRENDS OF TRAVEL AGENCIES CONSIDERING INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY

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ABSTRACT

The study aimed to identify the future trends of travel agencies in light of the continuous development of information technology and its applications in tourism. The study used the qualitative method of semi-structured interviews with a sample of 20 employees and managers from travel agencies in the Jordanian capital, Amman. The study results showed that the sample members knew the importance of e-tourism for travel agencies. The sample members also agreed that one of the most important obstacles to applying technology is the lack of knowledge of modern technological applications and the lack of funding to provide the appropriate infrastructure. On the other hand, the sample showed legal concerns that affect the adoption of current technological trends. However, some respondents argued that travel agencies could not cancel the traditional form of their work due to the societal culture that still tends to deal face-to-face with service providers. Based on the study findings, managerial implementations were suggested.

KEYWORDS

Travel agencies, information technology, future trends, Amman.

المخلص

هدفت الدراسة إلى التعرف على الاتجاهات المستقبلية لوكالات السفر في ظل التطور المستمر في تكنولوجيا المعلومات وتطبيقاتها في السياحة. استخدمت الدراسة المنهج النوعي للمقابلات شبه المنظمة مع عينة من ٢٠ موظفاً ومديراً لوكالات السفر في العاصمة الأردنية عمان. أظهرت نتائج الدراسة أن العينة لديها وعي كامل بأهمية السياحة الإلكترونية لوكالات السفر. كما اتفق أفراد العينة على أن أحد أهم معوقات تطبيق التكنولوجيا هو نقص المعرفة بالتطبيقات التكنولوجية الحديثة وقلة التمويل لتوفير البنية التحتية المناسبة لذلك. من ناحية أخرى، أظهرت العينة مخاوف قانونية تؤثر على تبني الاتجاهات التكنولوجية الحديثة. ومع ذلك، جادل بعض المستجيبين بأن وكالات السفر لن تكون قادرة على إلغاء الشكل التقليدي لعملهم بسبب الثقافة المجتمعية التي لا تزال تميل إلى التعامل وجهًا لوجه مع مقدمي الخدمات. بناءً على نتائج الدراسة، تم اقتراح توصيات إدارية.

الكلمات الدالة

وكالات السفر، تكنولوجيا المعلومات، الاتجاهات المستقبلية، عمان.

1. INTRODUCTION:

In light of the rapid technological development in many practical and life fields, such as learning, social communication, entertainment, leisure, and shopping, new technologies have been associated with the development of the tourism sector, which led to a fundamental transformation in the travel and tourism industry (Werthner and Klein 1999). Global revenue statistics showed that online travel bookings for the year (2011-2017) amounted to \$513 billion, and online digital travel sales for 2019 amounted to about \$755 billion worldwide (Statista 2022).

Reservation of tourism services depends on travel agents as an intermediary between tourism service providers on the one hand and clients on the other (Buhalis 1996). As a result, the spread of information technology has increased the ease of navigation and the quality of information for marketing considerations (Kaplanidou and Vogt 2006). According to Buhalis and Licata (2002), many of the simple services provided by tourism agencies have moved to a website through which they are booked so that major travel companies bypass travel agencies and deliver their packages directly over the Internet. Recent developments and the adoption of smartphones and their applications for travel have also contributed to guiding tourist decisions (Wang and Ritchie 2012). Hence, travel agencies must go beyond the traditional model in sales and marketing operations, which is described as short-term (Buhalis and Licata 2002).

Here, what happened with the British company Thomas Cook, world-famous for organizing tourist trips, is worth noting. The company announced its exit from the market in 2019. It served 19 million passengers annually in more than 16 countries and earned 9.6 billion pounds (\$12 billion). In 2018, its debt amounted to \$1.7 billion (Al Jazeera 2019). The main reason for stopping its business is its inability to attract new generations to book through its offices. Although 60% of Britons went on vacation in 2018, most made reservations through websites such as Ryan Air and Airbub. Based on this proposition, the problem of the study revolves around identifying the future trends of travel agencies in light of the continuous development of information technology and its applications in tourism.

2. Literature Review

The literature shows several definitions of e-tourism, Buhalis (1996) defined it as digitizing information and distribution chains in the tourism industry and the relationships between tourism agency owners and service providers. This concept would determine competitiveness and ways of interacting with customers. According to (Bajpai and Lee 2015), e-tourism is a phenomenon that includes both the consumer and the supplier of a particular tourist service. Therefore, it can be defined as a service provided to tourists through websites and specialized programs.

From the year (2000), the field of information technology has become mainly focused on developing an extensive series of services that facilitate interaction between market actors at the global level. The development of search engines has affected the speed of information transmission, thus increasing the number of tourists who use technology to plan and document their trips. According to Internet World (Statista 2022), the number of browsers globally reached 4.9 billion Internet users. According to the International Tourism Partnership (ITB) report, the Internet took a significant place in buying tourist trips, with 54% of reservations compared to traditional travel agencies, which fell to 24%.

The importance of e-tourism lies in its relationship to pre-purchase promotion, service provision, product marketing, and transaction chain management using digital technologies. Several companies, especially small and medium ones, are considering using technology to open a new sales channel for new consumers in international tourism markets (Nie 2007). In this regard, it is argued that the key to the success of the Internet lies in quickly identifying customers' needs through direct contact to provide comprehensive and up-to-date information (Vich-I-Martorell 2004). Information technology allows small and medium-sized businesses to do business in new and more cost-effective ways. In addition, one of the most critical factors contributing to a travel site's success is lower costs, higher revenue, and greater market share. The Internet allows

travelers to communicate directly with service providers to request information. It enables consumers to develop and purchase their itineraries, thus creating a competitive advantage (Buhalis 1998).

From the marketing side, ICT allows customers to identify and purchase tourism products. It is also an effective tool for travel agencies to develop their business and distribute offers worldwide. That is why more research into new technologies has helped to predict future tourism industry developments. It is widely expected that the Internet will change the role of tourism agencies in providing information, decreasing the importance of travel agencies and thus leading consumers to bypass them altogether. On the other hand, studies have shown direct compatibility between the Internet and travel agencies (Barnett and Standing 2001).

Recognizing barriers to the use of information technology enables better management decision-making. It is also beneficial for government agencies that have launched an initiative for an operational e-commerce infrastructure to support the development of SMEs. However, barriers to adopting e-tourism in travel agencies have not been thoroughly investigated and documented (Hung et al. 2011). Obstacles can be classified into internal and external. The most prominent internal barriers lie in employees' lack of knowledge and technical skills (Apulu and O. Ige 2011) and ignorance in dealing with e-tourism by users (Kamel and Hussein 2002).

On the other hand, financing in tourism companies is a critical factor affecting the adoption of information technology (Suárez et al. 2007). This includes financing costs, equipment, and programs (Anand et al. 2010). Some travel agencies do not want to take risks due to uncertainty about the benefits of new technology, with concerns about its users such as piracy, lack of strategies to deal with technological issues (Dutta and Coury 2002), and possible loss of customers due to business restructuring (Thulani et al. 2010).

As for the external obstacles, the most important of them are legal concerns that affect the decision to adopt technology or to maintain the traditional system (Hung et al. 2011), in addition to the lack of security in data confidentiality and payment methods (Mir et al. 2011). There are also obstacles caused by tax issues and laws related to the technology environment (Warden and Tunzelana 2004). The business environment is sometimes considered another external obstacle that affects the relationship of travel and tourism agencies with information technology. The technology environment relates to the political system, the regulatory environment (Ayeh 2007), the separation between the public and private sectors, and the determination of market policies (Hung et al. 2011). Additionally, customer culture can be a significant barrier to technology adoption if there is a lack of trust in the technology (Simmons et al., 2008).

However, continuous technological updates are supposed to encourage travel agencies to effectively change how they conduct their business, thus creating a significant competitive advantage. Many travel agencies were previously able to cover a specific market, but according to the new system, larger markets can be reached due to new technologies (Mihajlović 2012). These technologies have provided customers with many options during pre-purchase activities such as searching, planning, and comparing products and services (Buhalis and Law 2008). Similarly, tourists can access service providers and quickly compare products before making a final purchase decision on a travel destination and services. Accordingly, a travel agency that ignores new technologies due to high costs or inexperienced staff runs the risks of competition and adapting to the latest market environment.

3. Methodology

The descriptive-analytical method was used with its qualitative tool. Qualitative research is based on obtaining data through open communications and conversations. This method is not only about “what” people think but also “why” they think (Heaton 2016). The researcher is the data collection tool in qualitative research rather than using a standard tool or measuring device. The researcher asks questions, collects data, interprets, and records what is observed (Lincoln and Guba 1989). The use of the qualitative method in the current study is justified since it undertakes an exploratory new topic (Khan 2014). Further, the study deals with a specialized topic that needs experienced respondents who have a deep insight into the dimensions of the subject (Walsh 2003) and a topic related to the service sector beyond the causal relationships (de Ruyter and Scholl 1998).

Semi-structured interviews were conducted. This type of interview is known for being flexible and, most notably, for its ability to reveal important and often hidden aspects of human and organizational behavior (Vaivio 2012). This type of interview is also described as a human conversation that allows the researcher to modify the style and order of the questions to obtain complete responses from the managers' experience in their confidential environment (Schwartzman 1993). The study population consisted of all the travel agencies in Amman. According to the Jordan Society of Tourism and Travel Agents (JSTA), 583 travel agencies in Amman (Jordan Society of Tourism & Travel Agents - JSTA 2019). The snowball sampling method was used to select participants according to the appropriate characteristics of the current study. In this type of sampling, participants with diverse social ties can suggest to other relevant co-researchers worthy of interviews (Noy 2008). A sample of 20 managers and employees working in travel agencies were selected based on their experience and reputation in the Jordanian tourism market. Although there are no rules for sample size in the qualitative approach (Patton 2002), the current study relied on the saturation point to determine the sample size (Urquhart 2013).

Special symbols were used for the participants to maintain their privacy, as shown in Table 1. The interview questions consisted mainly of open-ended questions, and the average interview ranged between 25-50 minutes. The interviews were conducted from 10/15/2021 to 31/10/2021.

Table 1: Participants Coding

DMO	Destination Marketing Organization
ITP	International Tourism Partnership
ICT	Information and Communication Technology
CRS	Computer Reservation System
GDS	Global Distribution System
TUI	Tourism Union International
B2C	Business to Customer
OTAs	Online Travel Agencies

A commonly used qualitative and mixed approach, MAXQDA software, provides insights into qualitative data sets without suggesting interpretations through content. The

program's advantage lies in its ability to deal relatively quickly with the most significant number of interviews and categorize them into several topics (Marjaei et al., 2019).

4. Findings

The study findings revolve around the way and extent to which the interviewees recognize the importance of technology in developing travel agencies' business, its obstacles, and the future of travel agencies in light of the new technology.

Importance of Technology in Developing the Business of Travel Agencies

Most respondents agreed that technology applications' importance in the travel agency business lies in reducing marketing expenses, production and operational costs, and establishing new tourism activities. In this context, one of the participants said: "Technology is an essential element in the direction of travel agencies and the organization and development of their business, as it is the main resource for work development, regulating work methods, increasing work accuracy, saving effort, reducing the number of employees, and consequently lower cost. For mistakes in reservations, it is addressed faster" (TRA04OW). From a similar point of view, another participant said: "E-tourism is a path that increases the effectiveness of travel agencies. In the past, the measure of success and development was completely related to the company's number of branches and employees. Still, agency development measures are related to the number of sales and fewer employees, only one main branch and fewer expenses" (TRA12OP). Another participant added that keeping pace with Technology creates ease in dealing with the customer and the administration's dealings with its employees if the company has more than one branch and reaches the most significant number of customers. Technology solves problems during the travel period, such as the error in giving the name of the receiving agent at any airport (TRA01OP). From a contradictory point of view, one of the participants reported the failure of e-tourism versus the traditional pattern of travel agency business, saying: "The customer in the service sectors tends to communicate directly with service providers, and this tendency is considered part of the Eastern culture. Adopting electronic tourism is a failed project and is not considered a Gateway to Marketing" (TRA17SA).

Between the two points of view, another participant stated that even customers who buy the service directly from the agency already search for details online regarding quality, location, and price comparisons (TRA06SM). This indicates that the impact of technology is detrimental to the survival of the travel agency in the market. It was confirmed by (TRA11GM) that the name and product of the travel agency for the potential client exist today on social media platforms and websites and not in the agency's physical location. Regarding dealing with service providers, the financial director of a travel agency emphasized that using information technology has dramatically facilitated life. First, the agency has become essential in dealing with hotels or airlines, booking transportation, and others without any intermediary at a lower cost. Second, the use of technology provides the agency marketing globally, i.e., a wider geographical area and, consequently, a higher sales volume. Third, Technology enables customer satisfaction so that any problem is resolved quickly and sometimes instantaneously. Thus, he has confidence in the agency and a sense of safety during the trip. TRA04FD).

On the other hand, (TRA05SA) pointed out the continuous and rapid developments in the tourism sector. The information is subject to change instantly, which confirms the need to keep pace with these changes in the work of travel agencies. However, the issue is not without concerns about some internet marketers' lack of a physical office. One of them

said: "Scams have spread and an attempt to discredit agencies with the emergence and development of technology" (TRA03OW).

Obstacles to the Use of Technology in Travel Agencies

The majority of participants stressed that the travel agency business faces obstacles in adopting modern technological developments in their industry, the most important of which are the lack of qualified staff, funding problems, fears of legal consequences, tax regulations, and fear of data piracy. These obstacles drive many to maintain the traditional system.

One of the travel agency managers stated that the staff's efficiency and educational qualifications are among the main determinants of using modern technology. Even travelers prefer to deal with highly skilled employees (TRA02MM). Another travel agency manager emphasized this: "Having a very skilled employee in technology is a scarce issue in my experience in this field. Until today, we have not been able to solve this problem. At the moment, some employees may have a long experience, but others are not good at just sending an email to book a hotel in English" (TRA19OW). From a legislative point of view, the official in charge of supervising reservations at a travel agency said: "The lack of government laws that support the use of technology in tourism agencies is a gap that harms travel agencies, as these laws come down to the term security, safety, and taxes. Conversely, no online payment method is safe and secure" (TRA15RS).

One of the obstacles was related to the extent of customer confidence and satisfaction with receiving the service. An employee specializing in tourism packages explained, "There are two categories of customers: 1. The one who depends on technology in his reservations by booking via credit cards 2. The customer who does not trust the online reservation expects that if there is any problem, he will not be able to solve it, which is one of the most common categories" (TRA12OP). In this regard, one of the owners of travel agencies also touched on the absence of a culture of online purchase, stating: "We designed a special system for our agency with a high cost, and we discovered two types of customers: 1. Customers who are not good at using the system because of the lack of a societal culture of matters related to online purchases. 2. Customers prefer to check via the system but do not trust online purchase and payment" (TRA19OW).

Regarding the material and technical obstacles small and medium tourism companies face, a sales manager indicated: "In my opinion, small and medium travel agencies lack a department specialized in setting annual financial scheduling for the agency. Also, if there is a specialized department, you will discover it does not have enough information to look into the future because technology is an evolving world and is immeasurable" (TRA06OW). In this regard, the financial director of another travel agency argued that the financial component is one of the obstacles that significantly affect the use of technology. The agency needs very high capital to keep pace with technology. He also said: "For example, our agency needs to re-organize its affairs, and we started creating a system that links all the agency's reservations, and the employee can access it through a personal username. We sought to develop and update this system but encountered a cost problem" (TRA08FD).

Technology and the Future of Travel Agencies

The study sample showed different opinions about travel agencies' future in light of the rapid technological development in the tourism sector. Some expected drastic changes, including the exit of many agencies from the market, and many expected great difficulty

competing with larger companies. In contrast, others expected a good percentage of customers to continue using traditional purchasing methods.

A sales manager with 20 years of experience in tourism said: "Tourism has changed and transformed since the extensive use of technology where tourism products have become clear, prices are exposed, and the orientation is clear to everyone, but the rapid changes in the use of technology have made forecasting the future shape of travel agencies difficult" (TRA10SM). From a similar point of view, one of the managers with more than 25 years of experience explained that the future of travel agencies is limited to the use of technology and will result in competition that can be described as stressful. Accordingly, long-term planning would waste time and effort (TRA14OW). A sales employee confirmed: "What comes to my mind in light of these changes is that customers will go to agencies with intense online promotion because the product in the future will be characterized by a high degree of similarity between competitors" (TRA10SA). In the same context, another participant stressed that innovation in product marketing would be the decisive factor in determining the competitive advantage among travel agencies. It will also be one of the determinants of customer satisfaction concerning how the product is presented with the details shown smoothly" (TRA06SM). Another participant explained that product pricing would be one of the superiority factors. In this case, those with the largest market share will have the opportunity to survive because they receive preferential prices from service providers (TRA13TI).

One of the participants expected that large tour operators would seek to spread the culture of online purchases with the support of international credit card companies to give them advantages that make their competition with travel agencies difficult. In this case, we may be witnessing the end of the existence of small travel agencies (TRA02MM). However, some participants agreed that many customers would continue to prefer direct dealing with travel agencies.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

The current study results showed an agreement on the need to keep pace with modern technology in the work of travel agencies in terms of competitiveness, cost reduction, and quick access to target markets. However, the study sample reported obstacles to adopting technology, such as a lack of qualified staff, legal matters, and data security. As for the future of travel agencies, there was a difference of views about continuing their work with the intense competition in adopting new technologies.

The use and benefits of modern technologies in tourism diverge to include pre-purchase activities such as search, planning, and comparison of related products and services in the tourism sector (Buhalis and Law 2008). However, there is no consensus on the positive and negative effects of using the Internet and modern technology in the travel agency business. While some see that the spread of online purchases threatens their existence, others believe that travel agencies will become more important. Travel agencies can collect, organize and interpret large amounts of data that provide the best value and the most comfortable travel experience for the consumer (O'CONNOR 1999). There are things that blind people need to discuss in a human-to-human manner and not via the Internet. In this regard, Bennett (1993) says that travel agencies provide information and advice, which makes them safe in their continuity. What increases the confidence of travel agencies about their future is that the information available on the Internet is often messy and misleading. Thus, it is argued that travel agencies are a vital source of information in tourism. Travel agencies perform better than travel websites in terms of personalized

services, dealing with, and providing information in the right way (Law et al. 2004). Law et al. (2015) states that specific clients will continue seeking professional service from travel agencies. These agencies help with travel planning, which means a shift from ordinary brokers to professional information brokers who can provide expert knowledge of the destination and exclusive access to the destination's products and services (Dolnicar and Laesser, 2007).

Although many believe that a large segment of customers cannot do without direct contact with travel agencies, the presence of virtual travel agencies is a challenge. According to Suárez et al. (2007), tourism agencies do not face an increase in traditional competition but rather the emergence of new forms of competition from virtual tourism agencies, which lack a physical location but offer customers the same online tourism products. Harris and Duckworth (2005) suggested that the way forward for travel agents is actually through a combination of internet technology and specialization to provide customers with added value.

While the role of e-tourism appears in reducing marketing expenses, production operational costs, and establishing new tourism activities, some modern systems remain expensive and exceed the capabilities of many travel agencies, which makes them lose their competitive advantage. Therefore, it is necessary to look for other aspects of excellence. The lack of knowledge and skill in dealing with modern traditional technologies is unjustified by travel agencies and must be addressed through selectivity in recruitment and training programs. This failure reflects a cognitive and skill problem with the agency managers (Apulu and O. Ige 2011).

Legal concerns, including the tax system and data security, emerged from the study results as obstacles affecting the future of travel agencies. This made many content themselves with the standard technological systems in booking services and promoting their products via the Internet. The lack of confidence in e-purchasing is related to the false feeling of customers and sometimes of travel agencies. This may be due to the government's failure to deal with these legal and legislative issues and the reluctance to adopt recent trends in the use of technology by travel agencies for various reasons. Failure to find solutions to these obstacles will likely lead to the abolition of travel agency brokerage, as tour operators will sell directly to clients (Harris and Duckworth 2005).

Based on the preceding, the current study recommends adopting a joint framework between travel agencies on the one hand and the government and telecommunications companies on the other. This framework includes promoting the culture of e-tourism, especially regarding payments and data security, since e-marketing has become widespread and accepted by all market segments. It is possible to benefit from intimate experiences such as those in the United Arab Emirates. Dubai, for example, was ranked among the top ten digital cities in the world, which included keeping pace with the continuous changes in e-tourism. Based on the difference in opinions about the future of travel agencies in light of the significant development in electronic transactions, it is worth adopting the traditional approach and advanced e-tourism.

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