

Influence of online buyers profile on retail disintermediation: An empirical study on the Spanish hospitality sector

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Abstract

This research investigates the perceptions of different groups of consumers for and against the disintermediation of hotel reservations. A web-based survey is carried out among Spanish consumers and a convenience sample of 986 complete questionnaires was obtained. Multivariate tests were used to first analyze the relationship and dependency between socio-demographic variables, and second to observe possible significant differences between the “occasional”, “moderate”, and “frequent” buyers, assessing their views *for* and *against* the topic of disintermediation. Findings revealed that significant differences exist between online buyers, based on their socio-demographic characteristics and their online purchase experience. They also highlight that the Internet is used most frequently when people make hotel reservations for short-haul and short-term leisure travel.

Keywords: Disintermediation, User Generated Content, socio-demographic characteristics, online buyers, Spain.

1. Introduction and Objectives

Travel agencies is often considered an ideal kind of retailers for fulfilling the potential of the Internet (Palmer and McCole 2000), due to their offering of very different tourism products (e.g. hotel reservations, tourism routes, flight buying, etc.) whose features are very appropriate for the electronic commerce. According to prior research (e.g. Chaffey, Mayer, Johnston and Ellis-Chadwick, 2003), they can be considered as products where purchasing decision are based on information, that can be easily distributed through the web and that often can offer a better deal when compared to other distribution channels.

According to Hospitality Occupation Survey carried out by Statistic Spanish Institute (2012), the number of overnight stays in hotels during 2012 was close to 14 million, with more than 8.4 million of foreign travellers (63% of them preferring hotels for accommodation) and 5.5 million domestic travellers (18% of them booking hotel in their stay). Based on Tourism Movements Survey of Spanish people – Familitur, a report elaborated by Tourist Studies

Spanish Institute (2012) –, the total expense in tourism amounts to more than EUR 31.2 million (0.7% more than previous year). This data confirm the importance of travel and tourism retail sector for Spanish economy. Regarding the ways of organization, 76% of trips were made without booking, 4% lower than the previous year, acquiring greater presence booking trips with accommodation and transportation, with no involvement of travel agents. According to Pons (2012), 40% of all travel bookings in Spain were made online in 2011, 8% higher than 2010. The aforementioned data and figures allow us to observe the importance of the Internet as a heavily growing channel used by Spanish people to book hotel accommodations, causing a disintermediation process in an on going evolution.

During the last decade, the Internet has reshaped the way people plan for, buy and consume tourist products (Buhalis and Law 2008), changing the role of tourism intermediaries (Kracht and Wang 2010). Specifically, the Internet has increased the productivity and efficiency of hotels' marketing efforts, allowing hospitality companies to reach their customers directly in order to offer them promotions and sales (Law and Lau 2005; Tse 2003), thus rendering the role of traditional travel agencies questionable.

In Spain, a country heavily dependent on tourism, the debate on disintermediation and re-intermediation is rather common, and has nowadays become a hot issue for scholars and practitioners. While prior researches (e.g. Özturan and Roney 2004; Law 2009; Del Chiappa 2011, 2013) focused on specific geographical areas, the current study provides further insights into the scientific debate on disintermediation within a specific retail sector in a precise country (travel agencies in Spain). However, there are still few academic papers that have investigated the views of Spanish online buyers either for or against the disintermediation of hotel reservations. The present study aim at exploring this somehow neglected area of tourism research by presenting and discussing an empirical investigation on a sample of 986 online Spanish buyers. Specifically, based on previous literature analysis, this research aims at answering the following research propositions a) Do significant differences exist between online buyers, based on their socio-demographic characteristics and on their online purchase experience? b) How does UGC influence the online buyers' choices? c) Do online buyers use the Internet for their hotel booking differently based on the type of travelling? d) Do significant differences exist between online buyers, based on their views for and against the arguments of disintermediation?

2. Literature Review

The Internet is radically changing the way consumers buy products. The main contention about the Internet and consumer behaviour is that it facilitates the search for information and that consumers also have a wider range of retailers to choose from (Kirkbridea and Soopramaniana 2010). The most significant development in the Internet applications has been in the area of User Generated Content (UGC) and peer-to-peer applications, the so-called Web 2.0 (Musser and O'Reilly 2006). Within the tourism sector, UGC and Travel 2.0 applications are one of the most important sources of information for consumers making a purchasing decision (Gretzel and Yoo 2008). According to Xiang (2011), social media websites represent a considerable proportion of the online tourism domain within the context of planning trips using a search engine, even though there are considerable variations in the amount of social media displayed by more important search engines such as Google and Yahoo.

Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) in general and the Internet in particular cause benefits for both tourism suppliers and consumers. On the one hand, they allow suppliers to reduce their distribution costs and to gain higher revenues and a larger market place (Law, Leung and Wong, 2004). On the other hand, the Internet allows tourists to save time and costs when searching for information, to stimulate and expand electronic word of

mouth (e-WOM), to buy tailor-made products and to access a wider selection of travel service providers anytime and anywhere (Buhalis and Licata 2002; Anckar 2003). Nevertheless, the Internet can also produce some negative effects for both the tourism industry and tourists. Internet can influence tourism companies negatively because it creates online price transparency, it increases price competition and it reduces customer loyalty (Wen 2009).

Internet and ICT has not reduced the number of intermediaries in the distribution channel, but rather resulted in an increasingly complex array of intermediaries. The structure of the tourism industry has taken the shape of a complex global network. Within this context, participants at various levels will continue to compete, cooperate, merge, form partnerships, and change relationships on a regular basis (Kratch and Wang 2010).

In this line, the literature offers relevant arguments in favour and against disintermediation of the tourism distribution channel. The disintermediation debate has focused on both the revenue generating aspects of tourism distribution and on the search-for-information stage in consumers' decision-making (Grønflaten 2011). Among the arguments in favour of disintermediation are, for example, the great flexibility and variety of consumer choice, the poor level of training and competence of travel agency personnel and the fact that travel agencies are biased towards suppliers who offer overriding commissions. On the other hand, among the arguments against disintermediation, it is considered, for example, the time-saving that travel agencies grant their customers, the human touch they provide and the reduction in uncertainty and insecurity they ensure by assuming the responsibility for all arrangements (Buhalis 1998).

Kaewkitipong (2011) argues that, in practice, despite becoming increasingly intense, disintermediation will just require travel agents to acclimatize rather than to be removed from the tourism value chain. This author reviews both academic literature and practical survey research showing that effect of disintermediation on Thai travel agencies might not be as extreme as it has been on European tourism ones in the near future. Such a study enhances the need of a local look to disintermediation, as the present study does, where cultural and geographical patterns might challenge and shape the overall balance between on and off-line travel agencies.

Furthermore, Grønflaten (2011) underlines the need to consider the topic of disintermediation adopting an information search perspective. Tourists can use the Internet to make their hotel bookings in various ways and can be divided into those who only wish to acquire information ("lookers") and those who also use it to buy tourism services and products ("bookers"). Toh, Raven, and Dekay (2011) in their study reported 78% of respondents using Internet for information search, of which 67% making bookings online and a very small number using travel agencies. As highlighted by Morrison et al. (2001), "lookers" differ from "bookers" in several socio-demographic characteristics and in their Internet usage (number of years they have been using Internet, number of hours they surf the Internet per week, etc.). For instance, it was shown that the propensity to purchase online increases with age, education level and income (Bonn, Furr, and Susskind 1998; Weber and Roehl 1999; Law, Leung, and Wong 2004). Grønflaten (2011) found younger groups being less likely than senior group to prefer travel agents when searching for information. Further, Grønflaten (2011) found people older than 59 years and on an organized tour being likely to choose the combination of travel agents and face to face. In other studies, younger people make significantly fewer online hotel bookings than their older counterparts (Law 2009). Graeupl (2006) found "grey market" using the Internet mainly for information search being, however, more suspicious than other to the information available online. In fact, beliefs about the channel do impact continued use of the online channel differently. E-tail attributes indirectly impact continued usage as mediated through beliefs about using the channel (Liu, Forsythe, and Black 2011).

3. Method

The present study targeted exclusively adults resident in Spain and at least 18 years old. A structured questionnaire was developed that took into account previous literature evaluating the perception of travelers on disintermediation in travel services (Buhalis 1998; Del Chiappa 2013; Law 2009).

The survey used was divided into three parts. A qualifying question about whether respondents had any previous experience of booking hotels rooms online was included at the beginning of the first part. Only people who answered positively were allowed to complete the questionnaire. Respondents were then asked to reply to some general demographic questions. The second part of the questionnaire asked respondents to express to what extent they agree or disagree with a list of 8 statements chosen to investigate online buyers' views for and against the disintermediation of hotel reservations. A 5-points Likert scale was used (1 = completely agree; 5 = completely disagree) to indicate their answers. Finally, the third part asked respondents to state the types of travelling for which they usually make hotel reservations through the internet and whether they have ever changed the hotel accommodation that had been recommended by a travel agency after having read reviews and comments posted online.

Data were collected through an online questionnaire. A snowball sampling technique was used (Wrenn, Stevens and Loudon 2007) which is often suggested to reach hidden population segments that are difficult for researchers to access. A total of 986 complete questionnaires were collected in a two months survey period from people who reported having used the internet to make hotel reservations. The data were coded and analyzed using SPSS[®] (version 19.0).

4. Findings

According to previous research (Law 2009; Del Chiappa 2013), in this study online buyers were grouped into occasional buyers (those who have used internet to make bookings 1 or 2 times), moderate buyers (3 to 4 times), and frequent buyers (more than 4 times).

Table 1 shows the demographic characteristics of the participants in the survey. The majority of respondents were women (57.2%) in the age group of 18–25 years, with either a university degree (42.1%) or who had completed secondary school (40.8), with a monthly household income falling in the €1001 to €2000 (43.5%) or the €2001 to €3000 (22.7%) bands used.

The X^2 analysis indicated that significant differences among occasional, moderate and frequent buyers exist for age [$X^2 = 65.969$, $p < 0.01$], income [$X^2 = 84.919$, $p < 0.01$] and education level [$X^2 = 63.250$, $p < 0.01$]. This means that younger, less educated respondents with a lower income made significantly fewer hotel room bookings online than respondents who are older, more educated and with a higher income (Table 1). These findings do not fully confirm prior research carried out in Hong Kong (Law 2009) and Italy (Del Chiappa 2013). Specifically, the former study found significant differences only for age, and the latter for age, gender, education and monthly household income.

Broadly, our findings confirm the previous studies which found that the propensity to purchase online increases with age, education level and income (Bonn, Furr and Susskind, 1998). Specifically, the fact that younger respondents make significantly fewer online hotel room bookings than older people can in all probability be attributed to their Internet experience. As prior research revealed, Internet purchasing is directly related to age groups, with more experienced users likely to make more online purchases (Kim and Kim, 2004).

Table 1. Demographic profile of respondents and chi-square test (* Significant at 0.05 level - ** significant at 0.01 level)

	Occasional buyers	%	Moderator buyers	%	Frequent buyers	%	Overall	X ²
Gender								
Male	242	42.8	122	43.9	62	44.3	426	.182
Female	326	57.2	156	56.1	78	55.7	560	
Sub-total	568		278		140		986	
Age								
18-25	294	51.8	89	32	34	24.3	417	65.969**
26-35	91	16	81	29.1	41	29.3	213	
36-45	85	15	65	23.4	38	27.1	188	
46-55	68	12	32	11.5	23	16.4	123	
56-65	26	4.6	9	3.2	4	2.9	39	
66 or above	4	0.7	2	0.7	-	-	6	
Sub-total							986	
Education								
Below secondary school	26	4.6	4	1.4	3	1.4	33	63.250**
Secondary school	232	40.8	88	31.7	26	18.6	346	
University degree	239	42.1	122	43.9	60	42.9	421	
Postgraduate degree (Master)/PhD	71	12.5	64	23	51	36.4	186	
Sub-total							986	
Monthly household Income (€)								
Less than 1,000	92	16.2	33	11.9	8	5.7	133	84.919**
1,001 – 2,000	247	43.5	100	30	37	26.4	384	
2,001 – 3,000	129	22.7	65	23.4	31	22.1	225	
3,001 – 4,000	38	6.7	32	11.5	18	12.9	88	
4,001 – 5,000	17	3	18	6.5	19	13.6	54	
5,001 – 6,000	8	1.4	17	6.1	7	5	32	
6,001 – 7,000	10	1.8	3	1.1	3	2.1	16	
7,001 or above	13	2.3	7	2.5	13	9.3	33	
I prefer not to answer	14	2.5	3	1.1	4	2.9	21	
Sub-total							986	

X² analysis was also conducted to investigate whether occasional, moderators and frequent buyers are more or less likely to change the accommodation suggested by a travel agency based upon UGC (Table 2). Contrariwise to prior research (Del Chiappa 2013), findings indicate that significant differences do not exist.

Table 2. Have you ever changed the accommodation suggested by a travel agency based upon UGC?
 (*Significant at 0.05 level)

	Occasional buyers		Moderate buyers		Frequent buyers		Total		X ²
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	
Yes	313	55.1	161	57.9	91	65	565	100	4.631
No	255	44.9	117	42.1	49	35	421	100	
	567		278		140		985		

Respondents were also asked to tell us which are the types of travelling for which they use internet to reserve hotel rooms. Table 3, this happens the most for both short-haul (leisure: 93.8%; business: 35.1.9%) and medium-haul (European) travelling (leisure: 73%; business: 26.3%).

Table 3. I use Internet to reserve hotel rooms: An analysis by type of travelling (%) - (Respondents were allowed to give multiple answers)

	National	European	Intercontinental	Short-term journeys (4 day or less)	Medium-long term journeys (5 days or more)
Leisure	93.8	73	35.1	80.6	68.3
Business	35.1	26.3	12.2	36.9	15
Honeymoon	23.3	13.8	10.5	20.7	15.7

The same happens for short-term journeys (leisure: 80.6%; business: 36.9%) and medium to long-term leisure journeys (68.3%). Moreover, most people use traditional travel agencies when buying complex products such as a honeymoon. Finally, business travellers use internet less frequently than leisure travellers for whatever type of travelling is considered.

Table 4 shows the views of Spanish online buyers about whether they are for or against the disintermediation of hotel reservations. On the whole respondents do not agree with the statement that travel agents can provide a better service in terms of human touch (mean = 2.92). Participants also considered that travel agents are business-minded and place their financial incentives higher than the interests and needs of their customers (Mean = 3.53, Std = 1.014). Spanish online buyers did not agree with the idea that consumers ultimately have to bear the cost of commissions to travel agents for their hotel rooms (Mean = 2.76, Std = 1.042) and, at the same time, they do not trust the view about the convenience of seeking advice from travel agents and prefer the Internet (Mean = 2.23, Std = 1.209). Moreover, online buyers realized that websites are a more flexible channel to search for information and make reservations (Mean = 3.86, Std = 1.020), allowing consumers to perform most functions of hotel searching and room purchasing more conveniently (Mean = 4.43, Std = .814). However, respondents slightly agreed that travel agents can provide a better service in terms of risk reduction (Mean = 3.26, Std = 1.069) and professional counselling (Mean = 3.31, Std = 1.042). Further, Table 4 shows that significant differences were found in all but two questions between the views expressed by occasional, moderate and frequent online buyers for and against disintermediation. Compared to both the occasional and the moderate buyers, frequent buyers display a more positive view about the flexibility of websites ($F = 4.205, p < 0.05$) and the possibility they offer consumers to perform most hotel searching and room purchasing functions at their convenience ($F = 9.903, p < 0.01$). On the contrary, frequent buyers express a less positive view about the service provided by travel agents than either the moderate or the occasional buyers in four of the questions. These questions related to risk reduction ($F = 13.598, p < 0.01$), providing a service with a human touch ($F = 27.876, p < 0.01$), professional advice ($F = 12.539, p < 0.01$) and the convenience of seeking advice from traditional travel agents ($F = 9.572, p < 0.01$). To sum up, our findings were reporting frequent buyers being more positive towards internet-based hotel reservations than moderate or occasional buyers, thus confirming prior research investigating the different perception of online buyers for and against the topic of disintermediation (Law 2009; Del Chiappa 2013).

Table 4. Online buyers' views for and against the disintermediation: a comparison (* significant at 0.05 level – ** significant at 0.01 level)

	All respondents (N = 986)		Occasional buyers (N = 568)		Moderate buyers (N = 278)		Frequent buyers (N = 140)		F	Post-hoc analysis - Boferroni test
	Mean	Std	Mean	Std	Mean	Std	Mean	Std		
Technology, particularly the internet, allows consumers to perform most hotel searching and purchasing functions conveniently	4.43	.814	4.34	.878	4.51	.720	4.64	.647	9.903**	Frequent buyers > Moderate buyers, Occasional buyers
Web sites (electronic intermediaries) are much more flexible and can offer many more choices than travel agents for hotel rooms	3.86	1.020	3.79	1.037	3.92	.995	4.04	.973	4.205*	Frequent buyers > Moderate buyers, Occasional buyers
Travel agents are usually in favour of principals who offer more attractive commissions or partners, and thus make biased recommendations for hotels	3.53	1.014	3.53	.993	3.52	.993	3.56	1.139	.103	
Travel agents can reduce the insecurity of hotel reservations as they are responsible for all arrangements	3.26	1.069	3.41	1.004	3.14	1.071	2.94	1.219	13.958**	Frequent buyers < Moderate buyers, Occasional buyers
Travel agents are professional counsellors for hotel rooms and offer valuable service and advice	3.31	1.042	3.43	1.018	3.21	1.015	2.98	1.102	.12.539**	Frequent buyers < Moderate buyers, Occasional buyers
Travel agents offer a human touch and a human interface with the hotel industry	2.92	1.220	3.14	1.169	2.73	1.238	2.38	1.166	27.876**	Frequent buyers < Moderate buyers, Occasional buyers
Consumers ultimately have to bear the cost of commissions to travel agents for their hotel rooms	2.76	1.042	2.80	1.021	2.73	1.074	2.66	1.058	1.181	
It is more convenient to seek advice from travel agents on hotel reservations than from technology	2.23	1.209	2.34	1.227	2.19	1.181	1.85	1.112	9.572**	Frequent buyers < Moderate buyers, Occasional buyers

Discussion

According to Hosteltur (2013) there are about 22 million of internet users in Spain. According with ONTSI (2011, p. 84), 55.6% of total income of e-commerce comes from air transportation, travel agencies, tour operators, hotels, camping and road transportation.

This study was carried out to examine the views of Spanish online buyers for and against the disintermediation of hotel reservations. Differently to prior research (Law 2009; Del Chiappa 2013), our findings demonstrate that occasional, moderate and frequent buyers show significant differences in age, income and education level. Further they confirm that the propensity to purchase online increases with age, education level and income (e.g. Bonn, Furr, and Susskind 1998). Findings also confirm that online buyers are more or less likely to make hotel room reservations through the internet depending on the type of travel. Specifically, they highlight that the internet is suitable for buying convenience goods and low-involvement products (Chu 2001) while traditional travel agents are preferred when purchasing complex products (Wertener and Klein 1999) and by business travelers (Cobanoglu 2001). Results do not confirm previous studies carried in the context of Italy (Del Chiappa 2013) that have found significant differences in the way moderate, occasional and frequent buyers change the accommodation that had been suggested by a travel agent after having read UGC, thus suggesting the need to deepen investigate the topic via cross cultural comparison. Finally, results revealed that frequent buyers are more positive towards internet-based hotel reservations than moderate or occasional buyers.

Limitations

Aside from the theoretical and managerial contribution of the study, there are some limitations. Firstly, the sample cannot be considered representative of Spanish online buyers, even though its size is significant, seen that is mainly a convenience sample. Secondly, findings cannot be generalized because of the particular method of sampling we used (i.e., snowball sampling).

Further Research

In the future, it would be interesting to verify whether and how Spanish travel agencies are currently using the internet and social media in their marketing strategy. It could also be interesting to consider the problem of disintermediation in Spain adopting an information search perspective and making a distinction between information sources and information channels (Grønflaten 2011).

Managerial Implications

These conclusions are significant for both researchers and hospitality managers. On the one hand, they provide further insight into the scientific debate on disintermediation revealing that differences based on consumers' cultural background do exist and should be further investigated via cross-cultural comparison. On the other hand, the present study offers suggestions to both hotel marketers and traditional travel agencies. The hospitality marketers should design their websites to be more attractive for Spanish middle-aged and richer people who travel often and are heavy users of internet as a tool for both searching for and booking hotels (i.e: providing extensive informational texts and photos relating to hotel services, rooms and nearby attractions, assuring that the reservation system on their website is working properly, designing their website in order to speed up the process of searching for information and booking). On the other hand, travel agents should create and maintain a presence in the electronic market place and should move away from being booking offices and become travel consultants in order to be competitive (Anckar 2003).

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