Chapter 26
Tourism E-Booking and 'E-Purchasing':
Changes in a 5-Year Period

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ABSTRACT

Information technology plays a significant role in tourism, but mainly as an informational tool. Ideally, the information search process on the Internet should try to encourage consumers to book and purchase travel services and products prior to leaving for their vacation, but cultural differences in booking on-line are found. The present study research problem is to understand the complex of e-booking and e-purchasing travel behaviors among Slovenes, since no research between Slovene tourists was done before. In details, the relationship between e-booking and paying travel accommodation and travel transportation on the Internet in the period of five years is investigated. The results show slow changes and an increase in booking and buying travel transportation, while booking and paying tourism accommodation gains greater interest during a five-year period.

INTRODUCTION

Information Communication Technology (ICT) and tourism are two of the most dynamic motivators of the emerging global economy; the Internet is becoming more sophisticated across all of these areas (Buhalis, 2003). There are more diverse levels of consumers and increased competition, and many computer users have explored the Internet and participated in online activities such as shopping, communicating with other computer users, and entertainment (Kim et al., 2004). The

increasing use of the Internet since the mid-1990s has created a variety of new business opportunities which include many in the airline and tourism industries (Harison & Boonstra, 2008).

If the past 20 years have seen an emphasis on technology, then since 2000 we have been witnessing the truly transformational effect of communications technologies (Buhalis & Law, 2008). Some analysts predicted there will be no need for travel agents in the future as consumers turn to the Internet to make their travel arrangements (Lang, 2000), but a decade later travel agents still exist. This raises an interesting question about the effect of cultural differences on tourists' preferences of booking and buying their travel accommodation and transportation.

With the enormous amount of information potentially available to travelers, the Internet constitutes an important platform for information exchange between the consumer and industry suppliers (e.g., hotels, transportation sectors, attractions), intermediaries (e.g., travel agents), controllers (e.g., governments and administrative bodies), as well as many non-profit organizations, such as destination marketing organizations (Werthner & Klein, 1999). In fact, airlines have increasingly adopted the Internet as a platform to generate new streams of profits (Harison & Boostra, 2008). The Internet is not just a communication tool on which to transfer contents previously conveyed by other media, but demands new, appropriate communication and customer relation strategies, because of its contextual product distribution function (Singer et al, 2010). Tourism destinations and businesses need to acquire data about their potential and present tourists (Slak, Valek, & Axelsson, 2012). For tourism agents and tourism destinations using web-reservation systems for booking different tourism services such as accommodation, transportation, and even activities at the destination, it is vital to know how tourists act and react on the Web.

Despite the growing importance of the Internet as an information source for travelers, there is a general lack of information on usage differences among travelers from different countries (Huang, 2003). That tourists mainly search for information on the Internet has been confirmed by many researchers (Bonn, Furr, & Susskind, 1998; Weber & Roehl, 1999; Ho et al., 2012). The advantages of online tourism information search include the relatively low cost, customized information, ease of product comparison, interactivity, virtual community formation, and 24-hour accessibility (Wang, Head, & Arthur, 2002). Ho et al. (2012) analyzed different web-search strategies and found that of five most common search strategies, each individual search tactic may not be sophisticated (Ho et al., 2012).

Further, social media, a recent online development, is becoming increasingly important in the online tourism domain (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). It is widely recognized that Word-of-Mouth (WOM), both positive and negative, has the potential to influence consumer information searches and purchase and buying decisions (Sparks & Browning, 2011). As digital WOM, Facebook and Twitter can influence a tourist's final decision, as tourism destination images may be formed through online information and comments (Li et al., 2009).

Nevertheless, there are significant differences in access and usage between cultures, countries and socio-economic groups, which can make cross cultural differences between Internet users (Park & Jun, 2003). According to the Internet World Stats (2012), Asia is the strongest region by the number of internet users (44.8% of Asians), followed by Europe (22.1%), and North America (12.0%). By the same research, a total of 71% of residents are Internet users in Slovenia. Since no chapter to date has examined Slovenian tourists, the present chapter is prepared to present results of Slovene tourists using the Internet for purchasing a trip. On the other hand, Eurostat (2012) reported that two-thirds of Europeans used the Internet on average at least once a week, while one-quarter have never used it. The same research reported 64% of Slovenians use the Internet regularly,

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