

INTERNET –AN AID FOR E-TOURISM**Cristina Mihaela LAZAR***Ovidius University of Constanta, Romania
lazarcristinam@yahoo.com***Abstract**

Tourism is a rich and varied socio-economic activity that operates in our global society. The development of the Internet has led to the development of digital tourism, becoming the digital aid for the tourist experience. The tourism industry has two components that contribute to globalization: the participants (tourists and operators) and the expenses. Globalization and digitization have made the number of tourists increase every year, with enormous implications for the functioning, structure and strategy of the organizations in the field. Electronic tourism provides the tourist with the opportunity to identify and buy tourist services, as well as with the necessary aid for the globalization of this industry, bringing closer the enterprises involved in tourism activities to potential buyers.

Key words: *tourism, Internet, electronic*

JEL Classification: Z3

I. INTRODUCTION

In 2018, the number of Internet worldwide users reached over 4 billion, the number growing steadily from one year to the next. The development of the Internet as an aid for the businesses promoted in the electronic medium has led to changes in their development. Among the first sectors that have adopted and developed this technology is tourism. Currently, the Internet and tourism are two of the most dynamic components of the global economic development, leading to the emergence of the so-called electronic tourism (e-tourism).

E-tourism offers the opportunity to find and acquire tourist services, as well as to provide the necessary aid for the globalization of this industry. Moreover, the importance of the Internet for the tourism industry has increased in recent years, and understanding how people perceive this is essential for both tourist services providers and tour operators and retail agencies (Van Slyke, 2008). Thus, they can formulate marketing strategies fully exploring the potential of this technology, can enhance the organization's performances and improve the relationship with its customers.

II. THE BEGINNINGS OF E-TOURISM

The first steps in online tourism were made in the 1970s, when major airlines developed centralized systems for the global distribution of their products. Later on, they contacted travel agencies and other tourist service providers to facilitate potential customers' access to information in a flexible and personalized manner (Pan, 2014). American Airlines is one of these companies, which began in 1978 to offer travel agencies access to its electronic booking system called Sabre, and in 1980 it became available to the public as Easy Sabre. This service was extended until the creation of Travelocity.com in 1996, the first site to allow customers to book and buy tickets without the assistance of a travel agent. In the same year, Microsoft launched the Expedia.com travel booking site, which within three years became a public listed company that created a global tourism market used by a multitude of suppliers and travel agencies (Horner, Swarbrooke, 2004).

At the beginning of 1997, a new electronic tourism model, Priceline.com, was launched, which involved the sale of airplane tickets through a demand-collecting system, and a year later, through the implementation of an alliance with Delta Airlines, it diversified its portfolio, including hotel bookings and car rental. Another important actor in the history of electronic tourism is Lastminute.com, set up in 1998 in order to sell those airline seats and hotel rooms likely to remain unsold, which within seven years was acquired by the company that owned Travelocity.com (Wang, Abraham, 2011).

Finally, in 2000, Tripadvisor.com was launched, as a result of the effort of three founders dissatisfied with the lack of tourism information in the online medium. Today, it is the largest online tourist community offering travel information and advice about trips.

The evolution of all these systems comes with the implementation of electronic business models in the tourism industry, with a list of important launches and facts that started when traditional suppliers developed their own websites in order to establish a direct connection with their customers. The efficiency of search engines, the speed of information transfer, the speed of communication have quickly led to opportunities that

tourists fully enjoy, such as: buying airline tickets, booking hotels, car rental or planning the entire trip, all with a minimum effort, with the help of Internet connections from home, the office or anywhere else.

Buhalis D. (2003) defines electronic tourism as the digitization of all processes and distribution chains in tourism, transport, accommodation, food and leisure. At a tactical level, it is included in the sphere of electronic commerce, using the Internet to maximize the efficiency and effectiveness of the organization. At a strategic level, electronic tourism revolutionizes all processes, the entire travel distribution chain, the organization's relationships with stakeholders, and determines competitiveness, taking advantage of the intranet in order to reorganize internal processes, and of the extranet in order to develop transactions with business and Internet partners in order to interact with its customers.

III. IMPLICATIONS OF ELECTRONIC TOURISM FOR ORGANIZATIONS AND CLIENTS

Recent developments have enormous implications for the organization's operation, structure and strategy, and competitiveness depends, to a large extent, on the development of information and communication technology. Thus, the proliferation of the Internet has forced organizations in all business sectors, including tourism, to rethink their entire activity.

Few other sectors rely for the delivery of their products on so many collaborations with business partners and a distribution chain so complex as much as tourism does. The first improvement brought by the Internet was to facilitate communication by providing a platform for collaboration and trade between partners.

Initially, bookings made by passengers were listed on manual display boards. Travel agencies had to locate the best routes and tariffs in airline textbooks, then check the availability of the seats and make a booking via the phone before manually handing out a ticket. The new technologies completely eliminate these shortcomings, making the booking method simpler and more flexible, bringing various benefits to the buyer as well. A good example is the electronic ticket (e-ticket), a substitute for the printed ticket, which eliminates the tourist's risk of losing his/her ticket because the information is safely stored electronically in the airline systems. Furthermore, the online booking system has increased internal efficiency and management capacity. Thus, airlines know at any time what the plane's occupancy is and can adjust their prices accordingly.

Hotel companies also use the Internet for distribution and marketing purposes. Their online presence is essential to allow both individual customers and travel agencies access to accurate information on the availability of accommodation and to provide the opportunity to make and confirm booking in an efficient and inexpensive way. Another advantage of using the Internet in the hospitality industry is to reduce the costs of representation and promotion, savings related to printing, storing, managing and posting promotional materials. Moreover, this feature facilitates the entry into new markets, Internet advertising being the aid for globalization.

Tourists are accustomed to acquiring packages of travel services, consisting of transport and accommodation, arranged in this form by tour operators. Initially, they made brochures of travel packages and distributed them to travel agencies. In the early 1980s, tour operators understood the benefits of the Internet in organizing, promoting, distributing and coordinating their packages. Thomson's Open-line Program (TOP) was the first central booking office made by computers that introduced direct communication with travel agencies (Buhalis, 2003). This movement was the critical point for changing the communication process between travel agencies and tour operators, and the main benefits were reducing the costs of manipulating information and increasing its transfer speed, while at the same time strengthening the services to agencies and customers.

The Internet is irreplaceable for travel agencies, with effects on the organization's operation, structure and strategy, as well as on customer communication. Travel agencies currently have online platforms that allow booking for airlines, hotel chains, car rental and a variety of auxiliary services, as well as the construction of complex itineraries. Gradually, it has become clear that travel agencies around the world not only use the Internet to gain access to tourist service providers, but also rely on it to communicate with customers, and to distribute and market their offers. In addition, they can use the Internet to specialize in certain niche markets, offering them specialized and customized services.

The effects of Internet use have also been reflected in tourism destinations, positively contributing to their promotion. Traditionally, planning, management and coordination are carried out by a public authority (national, regional or local) or in partnership with stakeholders in the tourism industry. Typically, they provide information, offer advice to tourists and undertake certain marketing activities. As far as tourist destinations are concerned, the Internet has not always been considered to be an essential tool, but lately they have begun to integrate their online activities in order to facilitate tourist experience before, during and after the trip, as well as to coordinate the partners involved in the production and delivery of tourist services.

Tourist services are intangible, their production is simultaneous with consumption, they are difficult to standardize and cannot be stored. Furthermore, they are purchased before use, consumed after arriving at the tourist destination and are best assessed after consumption. Due to all of these features, tourism services are

associated with a higher level of risk compared to other material goods. Customers, therefore, search for more information through the Internet in order to reduce the risks.

The Internet allows the tourist to access reliable and accurate information, as well as make bookings quickly, at a lower cost than with conventional methods. In addition, they can compare information about various tourist destinations, holiday packages, transport, accommodation and leisure services, and can find prices and availability in real time. Immediate confirmation of travel documents is also possible, allowing potential tourists to make “last minute” bookings.

Lately, tourists have become more and more interested in virtual communities, mainly due to higher credibility than advertising. A virtual tourism community makes it easy to get information about the tourist destinations and services involved. Here one can maintain and develop relationships between tourists and eventually one can make decisions regarding tourist activities. By analyzing virtual communities, tourism organizations can develop a deeper understanding of the needs and behavior of their customers, thus adapting and enhancing their offer when needed.

IV. THE FUTURE OF TOURISM IN THE DIGITAL ERA

The Internet has revolutionized the way we plan and experience our travels. Basically, we can no longer talk about tourism without incorporating a digital component. People organize their upcoming holidays and travels in front of their computer or mobile phone, making compulsory the digital effort of the companies operating in this area. It can be seen from below that these percentages are steadily rising

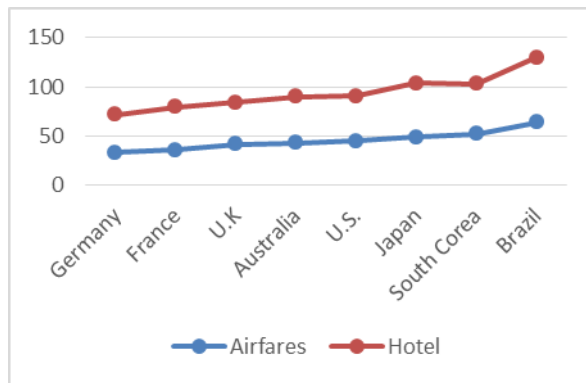


Figure 1. Percentage of smartphone users who consider researching hotel and airfares on their mobile device

Source: <https://www.thinkwithgoogle.com/consumer-insights/consumer-travel-smartphone-usage/>

Removing printed tickets or maps on paper support seems to be one of the main advantages of the new technologies. The mobile becomes more and more often the only thing that can prove the acquisition of travels, tickets or entrances to various tourist attractions. Moreover, the purchase of software can bring into the present of the travels images, scenes or objectives that existed in the area covered hundreds or even thousands of years ago, facilitating a movement not just in space, but also in time.

Thus, the competitiveness of both tourism businesses and destinations will increasingly depend on their capacity to adapt to the new trends of the era at strategic and tactical levels, their presence in the online medium and their knowledge of the tourists’ needs representing a basis for their evolution.

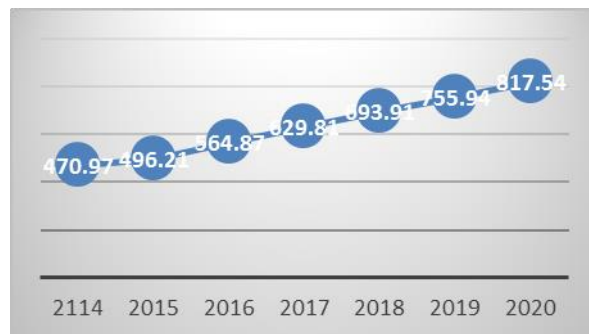


Figure 2. Digital travel sales worldwide over 2014-2020 (in billion USD)

Source: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/499694/forecast-of-online-travel-sales-worldwide/>

From the above chart, a clear conclusion can definitely be drawn: tourism revenues for 2020 are almost double compared to 2014. Opportunities for tourism and travel in the digital age are limitless.

V. CONCLUSIONS

In the modern society, all business sectors tend to move towards the electronic medium, and consumers are becoming more and more receptive to this change, based on the fast development of Internet technology.

Inevitably, the tourism industry took part in these changes of the era. All tourist activities have been transferred to the online medium, from information on tourist destinations and travel planning to booking and purchasing of tourist services, and large companies have taken advantage of all these opportunities, creating “giant” sites known and accessed by millions of users.

Digitization contributes to the globalization of the tourism activity, making it more creative and easier to access. The digital era also brings for tourism a new way of doing business, new opportunities, new markets that are beneficial for both tourists and organizations. Due to the complexity of the activities carried out, service companies have quickly realized the need to organize their work efficiently, quickly and inexpensively. The use of the new technologies and the development of the Internet have increased the internal efficiency and management capacity of the companies developing in the field of tourism.

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