

Socio-demographic variables' relationships in choosing between travel agencies and the Internet for leisure travel arrangements: the case of South Africa

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Abstract

Traditionally, travel agents have been seen as the key intermediary between suppliers of travel services and the traveller. Consumers of travel services can plan and arrange holidays themselves (online or directly through the supplier) or use the services of a travel organiser, such as a travel agent. Travellers will seek to optimise choices by selecting a distribution channel which will provide them with the greatest perceived value. The goal of this study is to investigate the role of socio-demographic variables in influencing consumer behaviour when making travel decisions, with specific reference to choosing between bookings through a travel agent or online. 408 South African residents were surveyed using a structured questionnaire, in examining possible relationships between travellers' socio-demographic characteristics and preferences in booking holiday flights or accommodation through a travel agent or Internet. Travellers were sampled using a non-probabilistic convenience sampling method. Descriptive and Bivariate analyses of the data collected were done. Pearson Chi-Square test checked for relationships between variables. This study made an interesting finding that unlike popular belief; the age of travellers does not relate to choice of booking via the Internet or travel agent. However statistically significant relationships were found between travellers' income level and race, on the one hand; and booking domestic flights online or through a travel agent, on the other hand.

Keywords: Travellers, travel agent, travel decisions, Internet, online booking.



Source: <http://www.outstandingcolleges.com/10-influential-travel-agents-canada/>

Introduction

The marked growth of online sales is causing severe pressure on travel agents in their attempt to consolidate and increase market share within the travel industry. The emergence of the Internet as a major role player in the supply of travel services will clearly influence the position of the travel agent in the supply chain. Previous research undertaken in South Africa (Correia & Elliott, 2006; Elliott & Boshoff, 2009; Lubbe, Endres & Ferreira, 2006; Wynne, Berthon, Pitt, Ewing & Napoli, 2000), provided valuable information regarding the development of the Internet as a useful booking avenue for travel services. Wynne *et al.* (2000, p. 420) argue that the Internet is fast becoming a key role player in the distribution chain of various industries. The advent and evolution of Internet shopping opened up new opportunities in distributing and selling travel products or services, such as air tickets and hotel rooms. Taking into account the rapid growth of Internet usage, it is postulated that the Internet is undeniably a key role player as distribution channel for travel services.

Information such as the way in which travellers make travel decisions, their preference of booking channel and possible socio-demographic differences and similarities regarding choice of an intermediary, is of immense value. With particular reference to popular travel booking intermediaries (travel agents and Internet); research has also found that travellers may make use of both intermediaries for travel planning and bookings, at the same time. Travellers in an attempt to achieve the best 'value for money' from a purchase identify strengths of either intermediary and make use of both intermediaries in satisfying their needs and wants. Studies by Jensen (2012), Kracht and Wang (2010) and Yang and Fang (2004) pointed towards the cross-channel behaviour of travellers in the decision-making process. Examples of cross-channel

behaviour include travellers who find the convenience of researching holiday options online at their own time, but preferring to make actual bookings through a travel agent. Other travellers enjoy the social interaction with travel agents, gathering travel ideas and suggestions but prefer to book online.

In the examination of the 'mature' tourism market segment (travellers aged 50 years and older) in South Africa, Correia and Elliott (2006) explored some of the factors considered to be universal in determining Internet usage: age, income and education level. Results from Correia and Elliott's (2006) study indicated significant variances relating to age and education levels with regard to the adoption of technology and the Internet as travel intermediary.

The findings from the literature review are by no means revolutionary. What it does point out is that there have been varied results emanating from varying research samples. It is foreseen that this study will complement current literature by either validating or contradicting past findings, whilst shedding light on nuances unique to the South African scenario, with particular reference to possible relationships between travellers' socio-demographic characteristics and preferences in booking holiday flights or accommodation through a travel agent or Internet.

Literature review

Travel intermediaries – travel agents and the Internet

Travel agents have been traditionally seen as the key intermediary (middleman) between suppliers of travel services and the consumer. Their roles include serving as information centres and being a point of sale for suppliers of travel services to the public (Bennett, 1995). They play a valuable role in matching the supply of travel services with potential demand, since it is often assumed challenging for consumers to deal with suppliers of travel services directly.

Travel intermediaries, consisting of travel agents and online or Internet suppliers, perform three main roles: a) they accumulate and sort “stock” – mostly electronically, since bookings are confirmed off inventories by travel agents and online suppliers, b) they minimise distribution costs by standardising transactions. Travel agents and online suppliers make use of various payment methods, i.e. credit cards and electronic bank transfer, and c) they structure information for both parties, the supplier and traveller, so that it is useful and may lead to a booking being made (Wynne, Berthon, Pitt, Ewing & Napoli, 2000).

Developments in the field of Information Technology (IT) have provided consumers with an alternative to booking via a travel agent - the possibility to plan and arrange holidays online (Hyde & Decrop, 2011). Suppliers in the travel industry, such as hotels and airlines, have identified the use of IT as both a cost reduction tool and effective distribution method (Vasudavan & Standing, 1999). The growth of the electronic medium is accordingly driven from both a supply and demand perspective. Kracht and Wang (2010), in their discussion of the evolution of the tourism distribution channel, point out that the advent of the Internet as intermediary did not necessarily transform the structure of the distribution channel from a simple to complex one, but rather made an already complex structure even more complicated. Whereas technology with regard to travel services in the 1980s stretched as far as a travel agent making use of basic travel software to make an air booking and using the telephone to make hotel bookings, the development of technology has led to a myriad of stakeholders becoming involved in the intermediation/distribution process.

The level of competition between travel suppliers and the complexities of contracting agreements through IT suppliers in for example providing software or support, further point to the complexities IT and technology brought to the distribution of travel services. Technology accordingly

brought new challenges to the consumer as well, with the lack of human interaction being the initial barrier to deal with. Many challenges have since developed such as distance and convenience issues. Technology increases choice. Travellers are able to read electronic reviews on destinations, compare prices or instantly make personal travel arrangements. Travellers will investigate and choose a distribution channel according to the choice that will provide them with the greatest perceived value (Izquierdo-Yusta & Martinez-Ruiz, 2011). Anckar (2003) agree, by postulating that consumers choose a distribution channel based on perceived net value of the channel, seen as a trade-off between overall benefits and overall barriers to using them.

The marked growth of online sales is causing severe pressure on travel agents in their attempt to consolidate and increase market share within the travel industry. Although the online intermediary is not completely dominant, travel agents, considered to be the main traditional distribution channel to wholesale suppliers (Anckar, 2003; Lubbe, Endres & Ferreira, 2006), will have to clearly re-evaluate their position in the travel industry in order to remain relevant.

Consumers make travel decisions according to a multitude of factors, which needs to be recognised by both online suppliers and travel agents. Such factors include issues such as trust in an intermediary (Izquierdo-Yusta & Martinez-Ruiz, 2011), shopping convenience (Christou & Kassianidis, 2002), the adoption of technology (Ahmad & Juhdi, 2009), and price (Mayr & Zins, 2009). In response, intermediaries are subsequently making use of ingenious marketing prose in an attempt to convince customers that their offering is superior.

The online booking website, Travelstart (Travelstart, 2012), promote online booking by pointing to the following factors: a) booking online saves a customer time and money, b) “you can be your own travel

agent”, in other words being able to control your own booking, searching for deals without having to rely on a travel agent, c) “having access to over 11 000 travel destinations” – being able to find airfares to your destination of choice, d) “having latest technology available at your fingertips”, e) “no hidden costs” i.e. no extra fees to be paid or added at a later stage, and f) “help always being at hand through interactive media” such as chat capability on a website, or being able to phone a call centre in case of requiring assistance.

In an attempt to convince consumers not to make use of the Internet and book through a travel agent, Chelsea Travel, a traditional travel agency based in Cape Town, South Africa (Chelsea Travel, 2012), points to possible difficulties in making use of the Internet for bookings: a) “the Internet cannot rebook, change or reconfirm times of flights on your behalf”, b) “the Internet does not show care and loyalty towards clients” (a statement that is opposed by Dunn, Baloglu, Brewer & Qu, 2009), c) “the Internet is a heap of information”, whereas travel agents “weed” out unnecessary information, and d) “if there is a problem with a booking, who can a traveller turn to?” (Chelsea Travel, 2012).

The benefits of the Internet from a supplier’s point of view are documented in research by Elliott and Boshoff (2009). The Internet acts as a unique and challenging instrument with which to market travel. Issues related to marketing strategy, such as the speed of Internet, customer convenience and the marketing reach of the Internet, were discussed in their research. The Internet is therefore undeniably a key role player as distribution channel for travel services.

Socio-demographic considerations for technology adoption for travel arrangements

The concept that online travel shoppers are typically experienced Internet-users is

supported in a study by Kamarulzaman (2010) where more than 70% of the sample reported personal Internet usage for more than four years. Kamarulzaman’s (2010) finding indicates that the adoption of online travel shopping is directly affected by user experience. Experienced users typically have more confidence and skill in using the Internet, subsequently relying on their ability to make online travel shopping decisions. Anckar and Walden (2002) further contend that a lack of experience in using the Internet is a critical barrier to a consumer’s adoption of technology. They acknowledged the fact that making travel arrangements online can be complex with, for example, different airfare rules and hotel cancellation penalties that create anxiety for online users, who are not used to dealing with such complexities.

It is interesting to observe that research by Moital, Vaughan, Edwards and Peres (2009) and Ryan and Rao (2008) found perceived relative advantage and complexity as two features in adoption of technology most often used, thus supporting the findings of Davis *et al.* (1989) more than 20 years later. From the findings of the above-mentioned researchers, it can be postulated that the higher the perceived relative advantage and lower complexity, the higher the likelihood of purchasing online. Even though perceived ease of use and perceived usefulness is generally accepted as main factors with regard to technological adoption, it is recognised that there is a multi-dimensional facet to the intention of making use of technology, as pointed out by Kim *et al.* (2005) and Ryan and Rao (2008). Other factors, such as perceived skill in using the Internet and functionality, play underlying roles in the technological adoption process.

Beldona, Nusair and Demicco (2009) have found demographic differences as an important consideration with regard to the adoption of technology. The study refers to a generational cohort, which is commonly defined as a group of individuals emanating

from a similar experiential or contextual background. Groups of individuals such as the “baby boomers” (people born between 1946 and 1959), “generation X” (people born between 1960 and 1980) and “generation Y” (people born between 1981 and 1998) are examples of this. The importance of considering generational cohort lies in the fact that people from different generations share common experiences, which may influence their decision-making patterns. Generational cohort analysis is recognised as a social, broad and group phenomenon. People born during World War II have a vastly different background and general attitude towards decision-making compared to those born during the 1990s, and it is expected that the South African scenario with regard to travel decision-making will not be any different. Other studies by Rogers (1995) and Dabholkar (1996) have emphasised the significant association between demographics and the adoption of technology. An interesting aspect of research by Beldona *et al.* (2009) is that of the maturation of certain age groups with regard to technological adoption. The study reported on online travel purchase behaviour by various generational cohorts between early 2000 and 2004, with the finding that users born between 1953 and 1957 scored the highest percentage (74%) of online travel purchases amongst all age categories in 2004.

The 2004 result stands in contrast with that of 2000, where the same group had the lowest adoption rate (25%) in purchasing travel services online, emphasising the importance of time (the Internet as a medium has matured) and experience in adopting the online travel booking method. Little is known about generational differences with regard to travel decision-making in South Africa. Suffice to acknowledge that research results could unearth valuable management perspectives to both Internet suppliers and travel agents.

Ahmad and Juhdi (2009) suggested that in order for the travel agent to gain a relative advantage, it needs to simplify processes to meet the needs of travellers. However, many consumers are simply scared of using the Internet or simply cannot find what they are looking for. Some mature travellers, for example, were found to prefer the traditional printed brochure as research method to searching on the Internet (Lin, 2005). A survey by Anckar (2003) among all age groups proved that only 3.2% of respondents will make exclusive use of the Internet for travel planning. The dominant approach (66.7%) was for respondents to make use of both the Internet and travel brochures. It has to be acknowledged that the online realm lends itself ideally for the storage of information. Purely from a volume perspective, the travel agent will not be able to compete with the Internet. An equal footing, and possible advantage, can however be attained by the travel agent in assisting the customer in finding applicable and usable travel information – thus negating information overload.

A study by Tjøstheim (2002) further found that non-package travellers, for example, travellers wishing to purchase individual items such as an air ticket, prefer the Internet as choice of contact, whereas those booking package deals, for example, travellers making a booking which includes flights, accommodation and transfers, prefer direct contact with a travel agent and use brochures. It is suggested that the issue of complexity of a booking play a vital role in the trend mentioned. The expertise of the travel agent in grouping services and offering it in a package format is often greatly rewarded, with travellers expecting the travel agent to fill the gap caused by uncertainty by providing useful information in good time. Although not implicitly attributed to technological adoption, the tendency of reverting to the Internet for simple travel bookings and making use of the travel agent for more involved or complicated bookings, is an interesting aspect to consider in gauging perception

with regard to adoption of either intermediary.

Research method and design

A questionnaire-based survey research technique was used to collect the required primary data. This method is considered to be the most commonly used in tourism research. Mass phenomena, for example contemporary leisure and tourism do require much involvement from governmental, not-for-profit and for-profit organisations, as well as tourists, relying on quantified information for significant aspects of their decision-making (Ezeuduji, 2013; Veal, 2011; Zondo & Ezeuduji, 2015). Questionnaire survey is an ideal way of getting some of this information, as leisure and tourism information are qualitative in nature but mostly presented in quantitative form (Veal, 2011).

A structured questionnaire was made available for distribution in hard-copy (printed) format and online, via a web-based link. The reason for making use of both methods was to allow for more representative results and to reduce selection bias. Fricker, Galesic, Tourangeau & Yan (2005) and Simsek and Veiga (2000) point to the usefulness of mixed-mode surveys in that it potentially decrease selection bias, due to unequal Internet access by populations. Due to the fact that not all travellers have access to the Internet, respondents were allowed the opportunity to complete a printed version of the questionnaire in selected travel agencies in Gauteng Province of South Africa, which in turn was predicted to strengthen the validity of results.

Conversely, it was envisaged that the online survey format would allow a wider reach, be relatively inexpensive (substantially less paper required), adding to its value as survey method for this study. The hard-copy and electronic versions of the questionnaire were identical in content.

Web-based link questionnaires were sent out to individuals via e-mail, asking their consent in participation. The web-link was also posted on one of the author's personal Facebook page. The web-link immediately directed respondents to the website where the questionnaire was hosted. The host company used for the electronic questionnaire was SurveyMonkey, and completed questionnaires arrived in one of the author's e-mail inbox when completed.

Due to the nature of electronic media (being able to e-mail across geographical borders), the challenge of limiting the electronic survey to South African borders were recognised. Participants were made aware of the pre-requisite of residing within South Africa in order to take part in the survey. Compulsory introductory questions determined whether potential participants qualified to take part in the survey.

Should a potential respondent not qualify in any of the pre-determined criteria, they were redirected to the homepage of SurveyMonkey and they were not able to respond to the questionnaire. Technically, through identifying the unique IP (Internet Protocol) address of the respondent's computer, participants were only able to complete a questionnaire once.

The most effective method of ensuring most electronic questionnaires were returned by South African residents was by e-mailing the web-based link to South African business contacts, peers and friends only and emphasising the importance of geographical focus. For the hard-copy questionnaires, travellers who visited travel agencies were requested to complete the hard-copy version of the questionnaire. Ten travel agencies were targeted. Travel agencies were approached personally, printed questionnaires delivered and also e-mailed to the selected travel agents to distribute to both clients and potential clients to complete in the travel agency, or to be taken home and returned upon a return

visit. Respondents in travel agencies were selected based on consent and at random.

Due to the extensive residential spread (geographically and residentially) of tourism students at Boston City campus (Pretoria, South Africa), the assistance by students in distributing as well as collecting the hard-copy version of questionnaires was used. The benefit is that a representative population were reached in the process. Further participants were approached by one of the authors randomly and business contacts, industry peers, friends and colleagues were requested to complete the questionnaire. A total of 408 questionnaires were received, of which 406 were usable. Selection criteria for participation in this survey were:

a) Individuals being 18 years or older. The researchers postulate that travel related decisions are mostly made by adults. b) The research sample should focus on leisure travellers exclusively (those travelling for pleasure, holidays, relaxation – thus excluding business travel). Business travel decision-making varies considerably from leisure travel decision-making. Business travellers generally place a high premium on flexibility and comfort, whereas leisure travellers tend to focus on budget and practicality of travel arrangements. Business travel is often booked by personal assistants or travel departments, which complicate the attempt of this study to focus on individual travel preference between Internet and travel agent. Due to the pertinent differences between the two groups, business travellers were excluded from the study. c) A respondent must have made a hotel booking or flight booking for domestic or international travel within the last year through either a travel agent or the Internet. c) Respondents should be South African residents.

The questionnaire enquired into respondents profile and travel patterns in terms of choosing between bookings through a travel agent or online for flights and hotel accommodation. Traveller profile and choice questions were sorted into categorical variables.

SPSS version 22 software was used for statistical analysis (IBM Corporation, 2013). The first stage of analysis used descriptive statistics to derive frequency for all responses (in percentages). Bivariate analyses of the data collected were done at the second stage of data analysis, using Pearson Chi-square test. Cressford (2003) and Veal (2011) supported the use of the Chi-square test to check for relationships between nominal and/or categorical variables. Pearson Chi-square test aimed to test for relationships between travellers' profile and variables of choosing between bookings through a travel agent or online for flights and accommodation. All statistical tests were done at 95% confidence interval.

Results and discussions

Tourists' profile and leisure travel pattern

Table 1 depicts the socio-demographic characteristics of respondents. They were more females than males. Respondents were mostly under the age of 50 years, dominated by white travellers. About 33% of them have a University degree or higher qualification, and about 42% having R20,000 or more as monthly household income. Paid employees dominate the sample, with most of them having access to Internet, and many of them responding they have shopped online before or made travel booking online. Many of the members of the sample population, therefore, can be said to have adopted Internet technology.

Table 1: Profile of the respondents (n = 406).

| Variable | Category | Frequency (%) |
|-----------------------------------|--------------------------|---------------|
| Gender | Male | 42.0 |
| | Female | 58.0 |
| Age group | 18-29 | 33.7 |
| | 30-39 | 24.3 |
| | 40-49 | 20.9 |
| | 50-65 | 18.4 |
| | 65 and above | 2.7 |
| Race | Black | 28.2 |
| | White | 62.2 |
| | Coloured | 5.9 |
| | Indian/Asian | 3.7 |
| Education | Primary Level | 3.9 |
| | Matric | 28.6 |
| | Diploma | 34.6 |
| | University Degree | 21.5 |
| | Postgraduate Degree | 11.4 |
| Household income per month | R5000 – R19999 | 57.7 |
| | R20000 – R34999 | 23.1 |
| | R35000 and above | 19.2 |
| Employment status | Paid employee | 67.9 |
| | Employers/ Self-employed | 15.1 |
| | Students | 11.1 |
| | Retirees | 4.2 |
| | Unemployed | 1.7 |
| Access to Internet | Yes | 92.0 |
| | No | 8.0 |
| Shopped online before | Yes | 62.0 |
| | No | 38.0 |
| Made online travel booking before | Yes | 69.0 |
| | No | 31.0 |

Table 2 reflects the leisure travel pattern of the respondents. 70% of them do travel domestically at least once a year, and 38% of them do travel internationally at least once a year. Domestic flight bookings were done much more online than through a travel agent, while international flight bookings were done much more through a

travel agent than online. Hotel bookings were done more online than through a travel agent. Respondents who selected the “not applicable” answer for domestic and international flights may have made use of both intermediaries and were unsure of which intermediary they made more use of.

Table 2: Leisuretravel pattern of the respondents (n = 406).

| Variable | Category | Frequency (%) | Booking online and through travel agent; compared by demography |
|--|---|-----------------------------|--|
| I travel for holidays domestically... | Once every few years Once a year More than once a year | 30.0 37.0 33.0 | <i>Not of interest to this study.</i> |
| I travel for holidays internationally... | Once every few years Once a year More than once a year | 62.0 30.0 8.0 | <i>Not of interest to this study.</i> |
| In most cases I book my domestic flights... | Online Travel agent Directly from airline Not applicable | 53.0 25.0 13.0 9.0 | ** Higher income earners (R20 000+) agree more to booking domestic flights online. ** Whiterespondents agree more to booking domestic flights online than other race groups, with Black respondents agreeing least. |
| In most cases I book my international flights... | Online Travel agent Directly from airline Not applicable | 27.0 45.0 9.0 19.0 | N.S. |
| In most cases I make hotel bookings via... | Internet Travel agent Directly from hotel Other | 39.0 31.0 24.0 6.0 | N.S. |

Notes: Pearson Chi-Square test significance. N.S., no significant results. *, p < 0.05; **, p < 0.01; ***, p < 0.000.

Socio-demographic variables' relationship to choosing between travel agencies and the Internet for leisure travel arrangements

Results of the Chi-Square test indicated no significant association between gender and preference of booking domestic flights online or through a travel agent (p= 0.61). There is no statistical difference between males and females in choosing between Internet and travel agent with regard to booking international flights (p = 0.21). It is interesting to note that, whereas both gender preferred booking domestic flights online (66% male, 69% female), both also preferred booking international flights through a travel agent (58% male, 66%

female). Both male and female respondents display distinct booking preferences between travel agent and Internet with regard to flights. There is also no statistically significant difference between male and female preference in booking hotels via Internet or through a travel agency (p = 0.21). From the results there is not much difference in percentage between travellers who prefer hotel bookings online or through a travel agent.

For the purpose of comparing travellers' age groups and booking preference, respondents' age groups were reduced to two groups (18 – 39 years; 40 years and above) for statistical tests. Respondents aged between 18 and 39 years consist 58%

of the sample, while those aged 40 years and above were 42% of the sample, resulting in an opportunity to compare groups of more similar sizes. In terms of domestic flight booking preference, Chi-Square test indicated no significant association between the age groups ($p = 0.77$). Scores were very similar between the groups, with 67% of 18-39 year old respondents preferring the online option when booking domestic flights, compared to 69% of respondents older than 40 years of age. There was no significant association ($p = 0.60$) when comparing age groups and their preference of booking international flights online (38.9% of 18-39 year olds; 35.2% of 40 years or older) or through a travel agent (61.1% of 18-39 year olds; 64.8% of 40 years or older). Even though there was no statistically significant association between age and preference of booking method for international flights, it is important to take note that the two age groups were quite similar in their preference of booking online. The result of this study could indicate that age is not an automatic predictor of, for example, adoption of technology or trust in technology. Both age groups presented similar responses with regard to booking hotels online or through a travel agent to that of domestic flights ($p = 0.52$). Results of the study by Beldona *et al.* (2009) provided marketers with the ability to target generational groups with travel products/services suited to their generational profile. The study found that senior participants (those born between 1942 and 1960) showed slow rates of adopting Internet technology. The result of this study in South Africa pertaining to age and choice between Internet and travel agent was not statistically significant but nonetheless interesting in that it opposed the finding of Beldona *et al.* (2009). In this study, respondents aged 40 years and above book flights and hotels online just as often as those aged between 18 and 39 years old. The implication of this result is of significance. It could point to the rapid pace at which technology is being adopted,

possibly due to greater accessibility and ease of using technology.

The Chi-Square test reported a significant association between race groups and the preference of booking domestic flights online or through a travel agent ($p = 0.02$). Majority of White respondents (72%) prefer booking domestic flights online to booking through a travel agent (28%). Though Black respondents prefer booking domestic flights online, the percentage variance is much lower than white respondents' results – 55% prefer online and 45% book through a travel agent. Coloured and Asian respondents also showed more preference in booking domestic flights online. The small difference in Black respondents' choice between online and travel agent for domestic flights was not found in the results of international flight booking preference. There is no significant association between race groups and booking preference for international flights ($p = 0.91$), indicating that race plays hardly any role in determining whether travellers book international flights online or through a travel agent.

It is important to note that, whereas all race groups preferred the online booking method for domestic flights, they all preferred the travel agent in booking international flights. When booking hotels, the statistical association between race groups and choosing between travel agent and online is not significant ($p = 0.06$), but follows a similar pattern to the results of race groups and domestic flight decisions. Once again, Black respondents have a smaller margin in choosing between Internet and travel agent for international flights when compared to that of White respondents. Black respondents also prefer booking hotels through a travel agent as opposed to White respondents who prefer the Internet. Coloured and Asian respondents prefer booking hotels through a travel agent. Though this study is specifically interested in decision-making or preference between Internet and travel agent, it is worthy to note the percentage of respondents preferring to

make hotel bookings directly with the hotel (24%), more probably through a phone call than 'walk-ins'. This result could lead to the insight of why there is a small difference in preference of intermediary pertaining to international flight booking (4% difference between White and Black respondents), against a more substantial difference (23% difference between White and Black respondents) in preference of intermediary for domestic flights.

The role of ethnicity in travel decision-making is not a widely researched topic, particularly not in the South African context. Carter (2008) examined African-American (Black) travel behaviour within the American situation and compared it with White travel behaviour. Carter (2008) postulates that Black respondents visit family and friends in larger groups than White respondents. According to Carter (2008), Black travellers are more apprehensive to travelling and making spontaneous travel decisions due to their segregated past. It could be assumed that apprehension results in a need for trust in the booking process. Carter (2008) affirms the assumption, in pointing to the tendency of Black travellers to make bookings with familiar well-known hotels. The human contact with a travel agent could potentially be an important feature in instilling this trust. Though not researched or reported, it can be argued that Black South Africans generally travelled less than White South Africans due to South Africa's historical past – mostly due to economic reasons.

A degree of travel inexperience could thus be evident amongst Black travellers. Inexperienced travellers could prefer booking domestic flights and hotels through a travel agent, whilst more experienced Black travellers, who travel internationally, follow the trend of White respondents in preferring to book online. The economic emancipation of the Black people since 1994 resulted in them having greater buying power. Cronje (2013) reported that the Black middle class more than doubled in

size since 1994. Greater buying power subsequently opened up the opportunity to travel more. With an increase in Black South Africans travelling both domestically and internationally, travel experience will grow and could potentially influence future choice of booking method. It is postulated that due to an increase in travel frequency, Black respondents will increasingly adopt the online method in booking domestic flights, and the gap between White and Black respondents will reduce.

For the purpose of comparing travellers' household monthly income and booking preference, respondents' income categories were reduced to two groups (R5000 – R19 999; R20 000 and above) for statistical tests. Respondents earning between R5000 and R19 999 consist 58% of the sample, while those earning R20 000 and above were 42% of the sample size, resulting in an opportunity to compare groups of more similar sizes. The Chi-Square test reported a highly significant association between income and booking domestic flights online or through a travel agent ($p = 0.001$). Though both income groups prefer the online option when booking domestic flights, it is clear from the results that a large majority (78%) of higher income earners (R20 000+) prefer booking online as opposed to 60% of respondents in the R5000 – R19 999 category preferring to book online. There was no statistically significant relationship between income level and booking international flights, with both income groups preferring to book international flights through a travel agent (60% of R5000 – R19 999 group and 66% of R20 000+ group).

The results indicate that a higher income level is not necessarily indicative of not having to making use of a travel agent to book international flights. There was also no statistical association between income level and booking hotels online or through the travel agent. Both lower and higher income earners prefer booking hotels on the Internet, with lower margins than with

booking domestic or international flights. The assumption that higher income earners inevitably travel more than lower income earners is opposed by the study of Kattiyapornpong and Miller (2009), where it was found that lower income groups undertake significant travel. This is an important finding in that it demands an answer to the question: if income is not a clear indicator of travel frequency, could it be a predictor of booking channel preference? A highly significant relationship between income and booking domestic flights online or via a travel agent was reported. Both lower income groups (60%) and higher income groups (78%) preferred booking domestic flights online, with higher income groups showing a greater degree of preference to book online. Both income groups preferred booking international flights through a travel agent. Though income could affect travel decision-making in terms of holiday destination or method of travel, this study found that it does not necessarily affect the decision in choice of an intermediary.

Conclusions

This study made an interesting finding opposed to the popular belief that the age of travellers do relates to choice of booking via the Internet or the travel agent. The result of this study showed that age is not an automatic predictor of technology adoption or trust in technology. It could point to the rapid pace at which technology is being adopted, possibly due to greater accessibility and ease of using technology. However statistically significant relationships were found between travellers' income level and race; and booking domestic flights online or through a travel agent. Higher income earners agree more to booking domestic flights online, however results indicate that a higher income level is not necessarily indicative of not having to making use of a travel agent to book international flights. Though income level may affect travel decision-making in terms of holiday destination or method of travel,

this study found that it does not necessarily affect the decision in choice of an intermediary (travel agent or Internet). Much more of White respondents than Black respondents prefer booking domestic flights online to booking through a travel agent. Coloured and Asian respondents also showed more preference than Black respondents in booking domestic flights online.

Nowadays, due to the continuous increase in the size of the Black middle and upper class, Black South Africans will travel more, domestically and internationally, travel experience will grow and could potentially influence future choice of booking method. This study therefore postulates that due to an increase in the travel frequency of the previously disadvantaged South Africans, Black respondents will increasingly adopt the online method in booking domestic flights, and the gap between White and Black respondents in choice of travel intermediary will reduce and at some point in the future, level off.

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