

### Choice of Intermediary for Leisure Travel Arrangements

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**Abstract:** Travellers can plan and arrange holidays themselves online or through the supplier, or use the services of a travel organizer, such as a travel agent. Consumers of travel services will seek to optimize choices by selecting a distribution channel which will provide them with the greatest perceived value. The primary goal of this study is to explore the underlying factors that influence consumer behaviour in making travel decisions, with specific reference to choosing between booking through a travel agent or online. Research with a perspective on travel decision-making in South Africa is limited. This study surveyed 408 respondents residing in South Africa using a structured questionnaire examining preference in booking holiday flights or accommodation through a travel agent or Internet. Exploratory factor analysis was used to identify factors influencing traveller decision-making. Factors that influence travel decision-making were identified to include 'trust', 'convenience and adoption of technology', 'best deal and price', and 'personal contact'. Travellers who preferred booking through the Internet found the potential of technology to save time and effort and to be convenient, due to the Internet being available day and night, important advantages of booking online. Travellers who preferred booking through a travel agent placed a premium on personal contact and social interaction between traveller and travel agent. They further valued the travel experience and ability of the travel agent to group transactions.

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

#### 1. Introduction

Distribution in the travel industry involves getting travellers and service offerings together. Information such as the way in which travellers make travel decisions - their preference of distribution channel or intermediary, is of immense value. Intermediaries in the travel industry compete for market share, making use of ingenious marketing prose (perceived value) in an attempt to convince customers that their offering is superior. Travel agents have been traditionally seen as the key intermediary 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 (Burkart & Medlik, 1981). 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. 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). 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 channel, seen as a trade-off between overall benefits and overall barriers to using them.

Previous research undertaken in South Africa (Correia & Elliott, 2006; de Jager & Ezeuduji, 2015; 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) 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 clearly influencing the position of the travel agent in the supply chain. 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) and price (Mayr & Zins, 2009). The primary goal of the study is to explore factors that influence consumer behaviour in making travel decisions, with specific reference to choosing between a travel agent and an online booking site, in South Africa. In attempting to achieve this goal, this study surveyed 408 respondents residing in South Africa using a structured questionnaire, and examined preference in booking holiday flights or accommodation through a travel agent or Internet. Research with a perspective on travel decision-making in South Africa is limited; hence this study will provide more insight into travellers' choice of a distribution channel in the South African context. Globally, the travel industry just like other industries is characterised by customers' ever-changing demands and behaviour. Studies on factors impacting travellers' choice of a distribution channel always need to be updated. This study will also provide updated information on the factors that motivate consumers to use a particular intermediary for travel arrangements. Results from this study could possibly be compared with related findings in the international literature.

## 2. Literature Review

**Travel intermediaries – travel agents and the Internet:** 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 minimize distribution costs by standardizing 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 traveler, so that it is useful and may lead to a booking being made (Wynne et al., 2000).

**Internet:** 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.

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. Further 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 (Elliot & Boshoff, 2009). The Internet is therefore undeniably a key role player as distribution channel for travel services.

**Travel agents:** 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, providing ways of adding value to travelers, in order to remain relevant. Hence, 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 traveler turn to?' (Chelsea Travel, 2012).

**Cross-channel behavior:** Travellers may make use of both intermediaries for travel planning and bookings, at the same time. Several studies refer to the multi-channel phenomenon of travelers making use of both the travel agent and Internet for different reasons (Jensen, 2012; Kracht & Wang, 2010; Rose, 2009; Toh, Dekay & Raven, 2011; Van Dijk, Minocha & Laing, 2006; Wolfe, Hsu & Kang, 2004; Yang & Fang, 2004). Examples of cross-channel behavior include travelers who find the convenience of researching holiday options online at their own time, but preferring to make actual bookings through a travel agent. Other travelers enjoy the social interaction with travel agents, gathering travel ideas and suggestions but prefer to book online. 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.

**Factors influencing travel decision-making:** Literature review revealed that the 'value for money' concept features prominently in how consumers evaluate a potential purchase. Factors influencing traveler decision-making are inter-related; however travelers will typically gauge the value of purchase by:

- a) Making use of an intermediary which they trust (Jarvenpaa, Tractinsky & Vitale, 2000; Macintosh, 2008; Izquierdo-Yusta & Martinez-Ruiz, 2011).
- b) Using a booking intermediary where they can save time, whether in terms of researching or transacting (Ryan & Valverde, 2005, Jensen, 2012).
- c) Using an intermediary which is suited to a traveler's individual level of technological ability (Anckar & Walden, 2002; Mayr & Zins, 2009).
- d) Making use of an intermediary which will allow the greatest level of convenience, whether physically (Buhalis & Licata, 2002) or electronically (Ahmad & Juhdi, 2009).
- e) Weighing up the price of a service against the benefits derived from a potential purchase (Buhalis & Licata, 2002; Del Chiappa, 2013).
- f) Evaluating some service quality dimensions: level of empathy (Cheyne, Downes & Legg, 2006), assurance in the booking intermediary (Austin, Ibeh & Yee, 2006) and reliability (Dunn et al., 2009).

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.

**Research hypothesis:** This research therefore posits this hypothesis –travelers make leisure travel arrangements online or through travel agents for different reasons.

### 3. Methodology and Design

A questionnaire-based survey research technique was used to collect the required primary data. Questionnaire survey is an ideal way of getting information from travellers, 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 decreases 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 Survey monkey, 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 Survey monkey 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. **b)** 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. Section A part of the questionnaire enquired into respondent's profile. Traveller profile questions were sorted into categorical variables.

Section B specifically focused on possible respondent motives in making use of either the travel agent or Internet, by reviewing the elements considered to be of critical importance in the decision-making process as determined through the literature study. The elements are: trust/risk (Austin et al., 2006; Izquierdo-Yusta & Martinez-Ruiz, 2011; Kim, Kim and Leong, 2005), ease of use and technological adoption (Ahmad & Juhdi, 2009; Anckar & Walden, 2002; Gianforte, 2003), empathy (Caro & Roemer, 2006; Wolfe et al., 2004), price (Cheyne et al., 2006; Mayr & Zins, 2009), cross-channel behavior (Jensen, 2012; Toh et al., 2011), convenience (Buhalis & Licata, 2002; Jensen, 2012), time (Mayr & Zins, 2009; Morgan, Pritchard & Abbott, 2001), assurance (Austin et al., 2006; Jarvenpaa et al., 2000), reliability (Dunn et al., 2009; Holloway & Beatty, 2008) and complexity (Moital, Vaughan, Edwards & Peres, 2009; Ryan & Rao, 2008). This section B part of the questionnaire were itemised along a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1, strongly agree; 2, tend to agree; 3, tend to disagree; 4, strongly disagree; 5, not applicable. 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). The second stage of analysis used factor analysis to reduce the large number of variables and group them into smaller factors. The ability of factor analysis to reduce and group variables, establish underlying dimensions between grouped variables and provide evidence of scale validity, is recognised in studies by Hair, Black, Babin and Anderson, (2010); Pallant (2007); and Williams, Brown and Onsmann, (2010).

Williams et al. (2010) refer to two types of factor analysis – confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) and exploratory factor analysis (EFA). Exploratory factor analysis allows the researcher to explore main dimensions in order to develop a theory from a large set of items. Confirmatory factor analysis, on the other hand, is mainly used to test a proposed theory and has expectations based on past information (Williams et al., 2010). Exploratory factor analysis was chosen for this study due to the exploratory nature of the research. The questionnaire consisted of 31 items that could explain traveller decision-making pertaining to using a travel agent or Internet in making travel arrangements. Factor analysis enables the researcher to identify factors that underlie variables, which in turn is useful in eliminating low scoring coefficients, which may distort results. Factor analysis accordingly facilitates the development and refinement of research theory (Williams et al., 2010). The Principal component analysis method (PCA) was applied to extract factors. PCA is commonly used to summarise the variance in factors and is a preferred data extraction method for reducing data volume, and to make prediction possible (Hair et al., 2010). In deciding which factors to retain, the Kaiser’s criterion technique was used. The Eigen value rule, emanating from this technique recommends that only factors with an Eigen value of 1.0 or more be retained for analysis (Conway & Huffcutt, 2003; Pallant, 2007; Williams et al., 2010). Seven components scored an Eigen value of above 1.0, with 35.08% and 27.17% of variance explained cumulatively from components 1 and 2 respectively. Factors with low Eigen values (less than 1.0) hardly contribute in explaining the variance in variables and are subsequently often overlooked in the quest for identifying and grouping high-scoring variables together (Pallant, 2007). The reliability of the seven components was tested via Cronbach’s Alpha.

The reason for using Cronbach’s Alpha test is to determine internal consistency of the scales examined (Gliem & Gliem, 2003, p. 83). Cortina (1993, p. 103) describes coefficient alpha as “useful for estimating reliability in a particular case: when item-specific variance in a unidimensional test is of interest”. The Cronbach Alpha reliability coefficient usually ranges between 0 and 1 (Gliem & Gliem, 2003, p. 87), with scores above 0.7 generally indicating a consistent scale. Despite the importance of reliability, there are no set or definitive parameters indicating a reliability of scale (Peterson, 1994). Peterson (1994) clearly illustrated this in comparing recommended levels of reliability amongst the most referred authors on Cronbach’s Alpha reliability scores. Peterson found that Nunally, the most widely referenced author on Cronbach Alpha, supported a score of between 0.5 and 0.6 as minimally acceptable in 1967, but subsequently changed this to 0.7 in his research of 1978 (Nunally, 1978), without much explanation. Peterson contends that recommendations on acceptable Cronbach Alpha scores emanated from experience or intuition and not empirical evidence. Commonly, a cut-off point of 0.5 - 0.7 is used for Cronbach Alpha values (George & Mallery, 2003). A low Alpha score could be due to a small number of items or poor interrelatedness between items in analysis (Tavakol & Dennick, 2011). For the purposes of this study, a Cronbach Alpha level of 0.7 was considered to be acceptable, with the exception of factor three (labelled *‘best deal and price’*) and four (labelled *‘personal contact’*). The factor analysis technique, identified, *‘best deal and price’* and *‘personal contact’* (self-termed by the author) as important factors to be analysed, since it contributed to 12.78% and 10.84% of total variance explained. Other factors used in the analysis include factor one - *‘trust’* and factor 2 - *‘convenience and technological adoption’*. The Cronbach’s Alpha score of *‘best deal and price’* and *‘personal contact’* however scored 0.62 and 0.68 respectively, which is lower than the generally accepted score of 0.7. Both factors were retained for analysis due to the small number of items they contained (three and two respectively) and the interrelatedness of the items (Tavakol & Dennick, 2011). There were no items loaded onto factor 6, whereas factors 5 and 7 were eliminated due to low Cronbach Alpha scores (less than 0.6) of 0.54 and 0.30 respectively. The four main factors retained for analysis explained 86% of variance in data.

#### 4. Results and Discussion

**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 (US\$1 is equivalent to about R12 at the time of writing). 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. 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 1: Profile and leisure travel pattern 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
	Colored	5.9
	Indian/Asian	3.7
Education	Primary Level	3.9
	Matric	28.6
	Diploma	34.6
	University Degree	21.5
Household income per month	Postgraduate Degree	11.4
	R5000 – R19999	57.7
	R20000 – R34999	23.1
Employment status	R35000 and above	19.2
	Paid employee	67.9
	Employers/ Self-employed	15.1
	Students	11.1
	Retirees	4.2
Access to Internet	Unemployed	1.7
	Yes	92.0
Shopped online before	No	8.0
	Yes	62.0
Made online travel booking before	No	38.0
	Yes	69.0
I travel for holidays domestically.....	No	31.0
	Once every few years	30.0
	Once a year	37.0
I travel for holidays internationally	More than once a year	33.0
	Once every few years	62.0
	Once a year	30.0
In most cases I book my domestic flights.....	More than once a year	8.0
	Online	53.0

	Travel agent	25.0
	Directly from airline	13.0
	Not applicable	9.0
In most cases I book my international flights.....	Online	27.0
	Travel agent	45.0
	Directly from airline	9.0
	Not applicable	19.0
In most cases I make hotel bookings via.....	Internet	39.0
	Travel agent	31.0
	Directly from hotel	24.0
	other	6.0

**Identification of factors influencing traveller decision-making:** Through factor analysis, four factors were identified as significant for the outcome of this study: *'trust'*, *'convenience and technological adoption'*, *'best deal and price'* and *'personal contact'* (Table 2). The factors were self-named by the authors and contain variables which relate closely to each factor.

**Table 2: Factor analysis: motivational dimensions, items and statistics<sup>a b c</sup>**

Motivational dimensions	Items	Factor loading	Mean	±SD	Cronbach Alpha	Variance explained (%)
<b>Trust</b> (combined mean: 1.95 & +/- SD 0.94)	Value added services	0.897	1.77	0.867	0.912	35.08
	Travel agent backup in case of emergency	0.808	1.83	0.938		
	Distrust of some travel websites	0.797	1.96	0.936		
	Superiority of travel agent knowledge	0.730	1.84	0.900		
	Superiority of travel agent booking systems	0.723	1.80	0.868		
	Superior travel agent rates	0.706	1.95	0.886		
	Need for expert advice	0.634	1.92	0.911		
	Exclusive use of well-known websites	0.632	1.77	0.930		
	Sharing ideas with a travel agent	0.612	1.86	0.952		
	Complexity of international flight bookings	0.566	2.11	0.990		
	Making mistakes with online bookings	0.511	2.19	1.035		
	Cost of downloading data	0.485	2.45	1.010		
	<b>Convenience &amp; Technological adoption</b> (combined mean: 3.14 & +/- SD 0.81)	Online searches saves times	0.723	3.18		
Online Travel information is trustworthy		0.716	3.14	0.720		
Finding specific info online is easy		0.683	3.25	0.798		
Viewing photos / reading online reviews		0.671	3.31	0.796		
Online transactions are trustworthy		0.668	3.23	0.797		
Convenience of online being available any time		0.613	3.11	0.793		
I can make own arrangements		0.471	2.76	0.999		
<b>Best deal&amp; price</b> (combined mean: 2.71 & ± SD 0.90)	Offering best deal	0.762	2.63	0.865	0.618	12.78
	Sales pressure	0.663	2.54	0.951		
		0.432	2.95	0.881		

	Internet price				
	Atmosphere in a travel agency	0.719	1.97	0.864	
<b>Personal contact</b> (combined mean: 2.0 & ± SD 0.86)	Doing research online and booking through travel agent	0.457	2.01	0.864	
					0.676      10.84

<sup>a</sup> Items were arranged according to results of factorial analysis (Eigen value > 1) and factorial loadings > 0.43 (Costello & Osborne, 2005)

<sup>b</sup> Questionnaire were itemised along a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1, strongly agree; 2, tend to agree; 3, tend to disagree; 4, strongly disagree; 5, not applicable

<sup>c</sup> Two factors were excluded from results due to low reliability scores

**Trust and deciding between booking online or through a travel agent:** The issue of trust played an important role in the results of this study. It was the highest ranking factor from factor analysis, with 12 questionnaire items (see Table 2) covering various aspects related to trust and 35.08% of variance explained by this factor. The questionnaire was designed to delve into these aspects and compare consumer opinions with regard to trust when booking domestic flights, international flights and hotels. The items relating to trust factors include trust in transacting online, the need for expert travel advice and travel agent backup in case of emergency. Austin et al. (2006: 25) defined online trust as the “willingness to engage in an online transactional relationship despite being vulnerable to the seller as a result of a lack of verifiable and adequate knowledge of the vendor, the product / service being sold and no guaranteed assurance of how or where disputes will be resolved”. Jarvenpaa et al. (2000), further state that for trust to exist, the consumer needs to believe that the supplier have the ability and motivation to deliver services of the quality expected. It is clear from both Austin et al. (2006) and Jarvenpaa et al. (2000) that the issue of trust in the relationship between consumer and supplier is heavily influenced by the realisation of expectations created by the supplier. Expectations related to trust include traveller dependability on a travel intermediary in offering travel services promised, expertise of the intermediary in terms of knowledge and practical experience, and familiarity – the ability of the intermediary to provide services that suit the specific need of a traveller based on understanding the needs of the traveller (Macintosh, 2008).

The Mann-Whitney U test was performed to test for differences between a categorical variable (Internet or Travel agent) and an ordinal/continuous variable (for example Trust). It is a non-parametric alternative to the parametric T-test and is ideally suited to detecting population differences when assumptions regarding the underlying population are questionable. The Mann-Whitney U test compares medians (*Med*), converts scores on continuous variables into ranks across two groups and subsequently evaluates ranks in order to check for significant differences between two samples (Hinton, 2010; Pallant, 2007). The Mann-Whitney U test revealed the high significance of the trust factor for both travellers booking domestic flights through a travel agent or the Internet ( $U = 5067, z = -7.56, p = 0.00$ ). The Mann-Whitney U test produced a similar result in travellers’ attitude towards trust when booking international flights. The importance of trust is indicated in the highly significant result ( $U = 5135, z = -6.47, p = 0.00$ ). The majority of respondents strongly agreed (32%) or tended to agree (38%) with the statement that travel agents offer ancillary services to exclusively booking flights or hotels, which prompts them to deal with a travel agent. The ability of travel agents to offer a service, such as assistance with visa applications, is an aspect related to trust and convenience. The visa application process is often a nerve wrecking experience. The trust and knowledge of a travel agent in regularly dealing with visa applications, could convert a possible online customer to booking through a travel agent. Backup and assistance is very important in case of any travel related emergency, whether a delayed flight or medical situation. Most respondents (34% strongly agreed and 32% tending to agree) indicated that the physical contact and backup a travel agent may provide in such a situation could influence them in making travel bookings through a travel agent. It is at times difficult for travellers to distinguish between facts and fiction when making an online booking. Respondents were inclined not to trust all websites, with 24% in strong agreement and 35% tending to agree that some websites are merely “good looking” and far from reality. The knowledge of a travel agent and experience in making previous bookings through reputable operators could be motivational in travellers preferring to book through a travel agent.



Respondents further indicated that travel agent knowledge and experience is superior to that of the Internet. Most travellers require expert advice in choosing between hotels or airlines when having to make a booking. The ability of a travel agent to consult a customer in person could generate a relatively high level of trust in a travel agent in assisting to decide between hotel or flight options. Jarvenpaa et al. (2000), Macintosh (2008) and Izquierdo-Yusta and Martinez-Ruiz (2011), pointed out to trust playing an important role for consumers making travel decisions. Literature further underlines the multi-dimensionality of the trust factor. Studies by Austin et al. (2006), Berthea and Moisescu (2011) and Jarvenpaa et al. (2000), emphasise the concept of offering services of value and quality in building a relationship of trust between intermediary and traveller. Experience in making bookings, either online or through a travel agent, is identified by Card, Chen and Cole (2003), Kamarulzaman (2007) and Izquierdo-Yusta and Schultz (2011) as being an important dimension of trust.

**Convenience and technological adoption and their roles in traveller decision-making:** The way in which travel products are supplied and being presented to consumers is changing as rapidly as technology is. Whereas it was technologically unthinkable to be able to book your own flights online 30 years ago, it is today a common occurrence. The availability of such technology subsequently led to further development in attempts by both the online supplier (Internet) and travel agent to provide travellers with the most convenient and technologically advanced method of making travel bookings. It was not surprising that both factors were considered to be important for travellers in deciding between travel agent and Internet. Ahmad and Juhdi (2009) Ankar and Walden (2002), Buhalis and Licata (2002), Christou and Kassianidis (2002), Jensen (2012), Mayr and Zins (2009), and Ryan and Valverde (2005) pointed out to convenience and technological ability playing important roles for consumers making travel decisions. Assessment of possible differences in preferring Internet booking to booking via a travel agent or vice versa and the role of convenience and technological adoption, was made via the Mann-Whitney U test, which revealed that both travellers who preferred booking online, as well as those preferring the travel agent, agreed on the importance of convenience and technology in influencing decision-making. The result is highly significant ( $U = 8317, z = -3.25, p = 0.01$ ). A similar scenario is evident in comparing convenience and technological adoption when concerned with booking international flights ( $U = 6140, z = -4.98, p = 0.00$ ).

A cornerstone of technology in today's age is its ability to save time. Holidaymakers often have to work long hours, saving up for a holiday and they do not necessarily have the time to research or book their travel arrangements themselves. It is thus interesting to note that 27% of respondents strongly agree and 40% tend to agree that the online intermediary saves them time when searching for information and booking online. At the same time, a large percentage of respondents (74%) agreed with the statement that it is easy to find specific travel information online. The combination of the Internet being able to save time in terms of searching and booking, and confirmation that finding information is considered to be "easy", is an indication that technology (in terms of booking online) plays an essential role in choice of intermediary. The functionality of the Internet in providing electronic reviews is highly popular, with 76% of respondents indicating a preference towards booking online. Technology has made it possible for business to function beyond the normal (08:00 or 09:00 to 17:00) business hours. The majority of respondents (25% in strong agreement and 38% tending to agree) enjoy being able to conveniently and at their own time perform travel searches and do bookings.

**Best deal and price, and their role in traveller decision-making:** Technology enables travellers to compare prices and "shop around" with ease. Price is an essential aspect in travel decision-making, and this was subsequently pointed out by the frequency results from the study. It is at times commonly assumed that the ability to search for flights or hotels online inevitably result in a cheaper flight or hotel night. Results from this study do not point to a different outcome, even though the percentage of respondents in strong agreement (26%) with the statement: "The Internet is cheaper than travel agents," is a little lower than what would have been predicted. A large percentage of respondents (37%) do however; tend to agree with the statement that the Internet is cheaper. Travellers are price sensitive, as indicated by results of the statement from the questionnaire: "I compare prices travel agents and online companies offer and book where it is cheapest," where 72% of respondents agreed that they do make price comparisons. The cheapest option is subsequently chosen, i.e. not necessarily the most secure or convenient option. Technology once again makes it possible for travellers to perform relatively quick searches in their quest for the cheapest option. South

Africa's cost of Internet connection and data use is relatively high compared to economically developed countries (Khumalo, 2013; Shinn, 2013). Khumalo (2013) points out that home internet access is too expensive for most South Africans, and that mobile access options tend to be unaffordable. Given this situation, a statement investigating whether the cost of downloading data is an important consideration when booking online, was included in the questionnaire. The high cost of data download being influential, is to a certain extent validated by the results that 19% of respondents strongly agree and 21% tend to agree that data download cost is important in deciding between booking online or through a travel agent. Buhalis and Licata (2002), Del Chiappa (2013), and Mayr and Zins (2009), pointed out to the price of service playing important roles for consumers making travel decisions.

The original traditional method of providing travel products or services to consumers is that of a wholesaler offering a product or service to a travel agent, who acts as an intermediary (retailer) in the process. This method is characterised by strong relationship building efforts on both the wholesaler and travel agent's part in offering the best product at the "best" price to the traveller. Respondents' opinion regarding the ability of travel agents to offer products or services at special, negotiated rates was tested by the statement in the questionnaire – "Travel agents have special, negotiated rates with airlines/hotels, saving me money". Interestingly, the majority of respondents (61%) agreed that travel agents offer special rates, resulting in a saving. Travellers could assume that travel agents utilise contacts and strong relations with airlines and/or hotels resulting in superior, negotiated rates. Another statement purposefully followed to assess travellers' opinion with regard to travel agents being biased in promoting travel products or services where they could earn higher commission. This statement reads: "Travel agents do not offer the best "deal" and are biased in promoting products/suppliers that offer them higher commission". Most respondents (35%) strongly agreed or tended to agree with the statement. Given these results, it could be assumed that consumers still believe that they save money booking through a travel agent regardless of travel agents potentially favouring suppliers where they earn higher commission.

**Personal contact and its role in traveller decision-making:** To travel is a highly sociable experience – travellers connect to different cultures and experiences and the identity of travel is subsequently shaped by human interaction, whether during the booking process or in the actual holiday encounter. The emergence and rapid expansion of technology have challenged the notion of empathy being relevant in the modern age, particularly with regard to booking a holiday. Many consumers are experienced and in favour of making online purchases, cutting out the human element which could lead to empathy in the booking process. The sales growth of low cost carriers worldwide is an example of the confidence in booking online. Results emphasise the continued importance of the empathy factor in the travel industry. Despite the apparent growth of online bookings, 34% of travellers strongly agreed and 31% tended to agree that personal contact with a travel agent is important. The majority of respondents agreed with making use of a travel agent, due to travel agents being able to provide ancillary services such as assistance with visa applications or obtaining foreign exchange. Even though travellers trust information obtained online, the personal contact and aspect of empathy are still important factors to consider.

It is far easier for an online booker to depart from a potential online booking when, for example, he or she is not being interested in the booking anymore. It was subsequently expected that consumers could potentially feel that travel agents come across as pressurising them into a booking in comparison. Results are fairly evenly distributed, with the majority of respondents (29%) tending to disagree with such a statement. The experience and atmosphere of dealing with a travel agent can generally be ascribed as being positive, considering that 59% of respondents agreed that they enjoy the atmosphere of booking through a travel agency. A large percentage of travellers require expert advice, whether through a travel agent or online through a travel review column in making travel decisions. 32% strongly agreed and 32% tended to agree with the statement: "I need expert advice in choosing between hotels or airlines". Cheyne et al. (2006) discussed the level of empathy, and Austin et al. (2006) discussed the assurance in the booking intermediary playing important roles for consumers making travel decisions.

## 5. Conclusion

This study therefore accepts the posited hypothesis that travellers make leisure travel arrangements online or through travel agents for different reasons. Four main factors were identified as having an impact on traveller decision-making: a) trust, b) convenience and technological adoption, c) best deals and price and d) personal contact. The issue of trust constantly ranks amongst some of the most important factors in travel decision-making and was examined in the study with specific purpose – that of determining whether trust is important in travellers choosing between travel agent and Internet when making bookings. The travel agent relies heavily on human involvement in the decision-making process. The ability to offer ancillary services is an example of the human component the travel agent brings to the relationship aspect. The Internet is unlikely to be able to group ancillary services together in a similar way. Travel agents need to build on their advantage of being able to deal with customers personally. Personal contact is a vital aspect of trust and many travellers make use of travel agents for the precise reason. Travel agents perceive to have an advantage over the Internet in terms of transactional trust since they are able to group transactions and assume payment risk. Trust in the online travel intermediary is an on-going concern to travellers. Information overload, transactional scams and the lack of personal contact stand in the way of online trust. Online intermediaries need to focus on building a strong, reliable, well-known brand – a website where travellers trust the information and the safety of transacting. The development of live online chat capabilities has the possibility of bridging the issue of personal contact through the creation of interactive communication.

The Internet makes it possible for travellers to research holiday options, read reviews and view photos of holiday destinations. 76% of respondents acknowledged their preference to making use of the Internet due to its ability to fulfil the afore-mentioned function. The result is in line with research by Del Chiappa (2013), where the author found that 64.8% of respondents changed their hotel accommodation after having read online reviews. Verma, Stock and McCarthy (2012) supported Del Chiappa's finding where it was found that a negative hotel review lead to a decrease in probability of booking a hotel. Respondents indicated a 2 out of 5 probability of booking a negatively reviewed hotel. The aspect of shopping enjoyment in the form of interacting with a travel agent is very important to some travellers. Results of this study correspond with the results of Morgan, Pritchard & Abbott (2001), with 59% of respondents agreeing that they enjoy the atmosphere of dealing and booking through a travel agency. This is not due to a lack of access to technology. 92% of respondents have access to a computer and 69% have made travel bookings online in the past. The issue of whether technology is busy taking over the role (and future) of the travel agent is a heavily debated one in literature and in the marketplace. Technology is advancing at a rapid pace, making it possible for travellers to book complete holidays online, without the assistance of a travel agent. The argument is thus not whether the technology is developed yet, but rather whether it will be adopted. The nature of trade is that of a seller offering a product at a certain price and the buyer deciding whether to purchase or not. A buyer will purchase if there is a need being fulfilled by the transaction. Price can be seen as one of the most primitive and traditional factors influencing any type of purchase. It is thus not surprising to find price as a factor influencing traveller decision-making. The ability to compare prices is significantly influenced by complexity, implicating that a complex booking involving for example international flights and hotels make price comparisons more difficult than a simple point-to-point flight booking. 63% of respondents to this study registered a belief that the Internet is cheaper than travel agents. 61% of respondents believed that travel agents had specially negotiated rates, saving them money.

Within the context of travel intermediary, empathy relates to personal contact in that travel agents are able to discuss and share travel ideas and impart travel knowledge and tips. The emergence and rapid expansion of technology have however challenged the notion of empathy being relevant in the modern age, particularly with regard to booking a holiday. Many consumers are experienced and in favour of making online purchases, eliminating the human element in the booking process. Del Chiappa (2013) made the surprising finding that respondents to his study did not agree that travel agents offer superior services in terms of human touch. A study by Mayr and Zins (2009) further found that those preferring to book online show noninterest in building lasting relationships with a travel agent and are purely interested in convenience. This result stands in contrast with the 64% of respondents in this study agreeing with the statement: "I enjoy personal contact with a travel agent – sharing ideas and suggestions," which was in turn supported by Bogdanovych, Berger, Simoff and Sierra (2006), where 78% of respondents indicated that social experience with a travel agent was

important. The importance of personal contact with a travel agent could relate to South Africa portraying a “high context” culture, where significant value is placed on social interaction. The human element and interaction, being able to sit down, discuss and share ideas regarding flights, hotels or destinations, are still important to travellers in South Africa. Many factors influencing travel decision-making are interrelated and dependent on each other. It is, for example, very difficult to adopt technology without a degree of trust in the technology itself or the provider of technology. Another example is the aspect of empathy and how personal contact impact on the trust factor in the decision-making process. Familiarity with a travel agent or Internet site often creates higher levels of trust. It is clear that the multi-dimensional nature of decision-making is of particular importance to a travel agency, online managers and marketers. Attempts to isolate a service, such as an air ticket, and to expect, for example, price to be the sole factor a traveller will consider when making a booking, is potentially fatal in any management strategy.

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