



An analysis of e-business adoption and its impact on relational quality in travel agency–supplier relationships

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ABSTRACT

This study analyzes how managers of retail travel agencies perceive the antecedents and consequences of adopting e-business in their supplier relationships. A comprehensive model integrating its antecedents and relational effects is developed and empirically tested using SEM. The study surveyed 101 travel agents in Spain. Research findings indicate that customer pressure has a strong influence on e-communication practices. E-communication with the travel agency's supplier and the pressure exerted by the sector are the main antecedents for e-procurement. Effects of e-business on relational quality are contradictory. E-procurement influences negatively on trust. Conversely, e-communication has a positive impact on trust, thus having a favorable impact on perceived reciprocity and travel agent's commitment to its supplier. Main findings indicate that the use of the Internet is largely driven by normative pressures, and this coercive power has a detrimental impact on trust. To avoid such negative consequences, perceived reciprocity is a prerequisite for committed supplier relationships.

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1. Introduction

The utilization of the Internet in inter-organizational relations is an important knowledge-based innovation that is of great interest to both academia and industry practitioners (Kumar & Becerra-Fernández, 2007; Stamboulis & Skayannis, 2003; Wu, Zsidisin, & Ross, 2007). The Internet is particularly powerful in certain segments of the service industry, including tourism where cyber-power has steadily gained popularity during the past two decades (Buhalis & Law, 2008). Furthermore, the analysis of e-business from the perspective of Supply Chain Management (SCM) is a hot topic in marketing and management research (Harrigan, Boyd, Ramsey, Ibbotson, & Bright, 2008; Kim, Cavusgil, & Calantone, 2006; Smart, 2008). The SCM literature is heavily dominated by tangible products, thus calling for research focusing on the service sector (Alam, 2002) and, in particular, on tourism-related services such as travel agencies (Buhalis & Law, 2008; Buhalis & Licata, 2002; Zhang, Song, & Huang, 2009).

Previous studies emphasize the importance of e-commerce in the travel and tourism industry, but empirical evidence for such effects is either lacking (Tsai, Huang, & Lin, 2005) or studies examining this phenomenon are descriptive in nature (i.e., Heung, 2003; Law, Leung, & Wong, 2004). Specifically, little attention has been paid to how managers of retail travel agencies perceive the consequences of adopting Information Technology (IT) in their relationships with their suppliers. In a recent study on tourism supply chain management, Zhang et al. (2009) state that “although a few tourism studies have addressed supply management issues, these studies are scattered and lack a clear focus” (p. 5). Although the relational behavior between wholesaler and retail travel agencies has been tested in the context of Taiwanese travel agencies (Tsaur, Yung, & Lin, 2009), there is a lack of research on the role of e-business in such relational behavior. Due to the effects of IT on supply chain relationships, more research is needed to analyze the e-business adoption and its impact on relational quality in travel agency–wholesaler relationships. To bridge that gap, this paper aims to analyze e-business adoption in the context of travel agency–supplier relationships.

The need for academic research in this setting is justified for two reasons. First, tourism is one of the fastest growing industries worldwide and, in general, the Internet continues to gain importance in the tourism sector (Buhalis, 2004; European Commission, 2006; Weaver & Lawton, 2007). Second, there is an ongoing debate regarding the competitive environment of traditional travel

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agencies with regard to the issue of dis-intermediation and re-intermediation. Dis-intermediation is usually associated with a significantly reduced role of traditional intermediaries (travel agencies and tour operators) in the tourism supply chain due to the introduction of electronic means that enable consumers to directly deal with suppliers. The re-intermediation process has also led to a new phenomenon - the emergence and the proliferation of online travel intermediaries (European Commission, 2006). Some of these operators (i.e., edreams, Expedia, Travelocity) have achieved considerable growth in recent years and consequently challenged some of established traditional intermediaries (Daniele & Frew, 2004). Some studies propose that the accessibility of online travel websites reduces the relevance of travel agencies, and this might ultimately result in travellers bypassing traditional travel agencies (Buhalis & Licata, 2002). However, others note that a key strength of traditional travel agencies is their ability to provide personal information and advice to travellers (Ryan & Cliff, 1997; Van Rekom, Teunissen, & Go, 1999). Consequently, for travel agencies that position themselves as travel advisors (Dolnicar & Laesser, 2007), the adoption and exploitation of the IT in the business processes is one of the key success factors (Huang, 2006; Suárez, Díaz, & Vázquez, 2007; Weaver & Lawton, 2007).

This paper examines and tests a model which integrates the antecedents and consequences of adopting IT in the context of travel agency–supplier relationships. Specifically, we pursue three objectives: (i) to analyze the level of IT adoption; (ii) to assess the influence of environmental factors on IT travel agencies' adoption; (iii) and to examine the implications of IT adoption for relationship quality constructs.

First, this paper analyzes e-business adoption in the context of supply relationships (Wu, Mahajan, & Balasubramanian, 2003). Only a handful of studies have used the Wu et al.'s (2003) framework, and it can be very useful in the context of travel agencies' supply chains and, in particular, when analyzing the relationships between the two e-business dimensions (online communication and e-procurement). Recent research examining e-procurement (Garrido, Gutiérrez, & San José, 2008) and e-business technologies (Johnson, Klassen, Leenders, & Awaysheh, 2007) uses a list of e-business technologies to measure the extent of e-business implementation. Wu et al. (2003) applied their research in a set of technology-related manufacturing industries (telecommunications, computer hardware, semi-conductor, manufacturing equipment industries). They analyzed e-communication (Wu & Lee, 2005) and e-procurement (Wu et al., 2007), yet research examining the joint impact of both dimensions is lacking. To bridge that gap, this study examines these two dimensions (e-communication and e-procurement) in the context of travel agencies.

Second, previous research shows the importance of environmental factors in the adoption of e-business (Joo & Kim, 2004; Srinivasan, Lilien, & Rangaswamy, 2002; Wu & Lee, 2005; Wu et al., 2003, 2007). In the context of foodservice operators, Sigala (2006) conducted an exploratory study to identify potential e-procurement adoption factors. As mentioned before, given the intense competition in the travel agency industry and the need for being travel advisors, it is important to analyze how perceived customer and normative pressures influence their e-business adoption. Previous research has been conducted in a B2C context (Suárez et al., 2007); however, there is a lack of research of the antecedents of e-business in the context of travel agencies.

Finally, this study analyzes the effects of e-business adoption in the travel agency–wholesaler relationships. Research in e-business technologies (especially in the context of manufacturing companies) has focused on the effects of e-business on performance variables (Johnson et al., 2007). Although relational quality is not a new concept, Tsaour et al. (2009) highlight the importance of

relationship quality between travel wholesalers and retailers. This study enhances our understanding of the impact of e-business on relational quality. As suggested by Zhang et al. (2009), adversarial relationships are the norm in the tourism industry (Sinclair & Stabler, 1997). To what extent does the introduction of e-business increase such adversarial relationships? Previous studies suggest that to safeguard partners from opportunist tendencies, perceived reciprocity is needed (Stanko, Bonner, & Calantone, 2007). In this study, we examine the role of perceived reciprocity in understanding supplier relationships in the travel agency industry.

In order to analyze these issues, this paper is organized as follows. Relying on e-business literature (Wu et al., 2003), we first introduce two levels of e-business adoption (i.e., online communication and e-procurement). We then propose research hypotheses regarding the antecedents and outcomes of e-business adoption by travel agencies. The paper concludes with the discussion of our findings and their implications.

2. Theoretical background and hypotheses

2.1. E-business adoption in the travel agency–supplier relationships

Travel and tourism is a fragmented, information-oriented industry, thus making it highly receptive to the benefits of the Internet (European Commission, 2006; O'Connor, 1999; Weaver & Lawton, 2007). The adoption of e-business – which can be considered a type of technological innovation (refer to Srinivasan et al., 2002) – poses both opportunities and challenges in inter-organizational relations (Lichtenthal & Eliaz, 2003; Webb, 2002) and, in general, in business strategy (Varadarajan & Yadav, 2002).

As mentioned earlier, Wu et al. (2003) examined e-business in four industries (i.e., telecommunications, computer hardware, semi-conductor and manufacturing equipment) from two perspectives: the loci of the adoption of electronic resources (within the company, relations with customers and suppliers) and their degree of implementation (communication, administrative processes, and purchase orders). The present study focuses on understanding the impact of Internet adoption in the commercial relationships between travel agencies and its suppliers (i.e., wholesaler), and specifically on the two dimensions highlighted in previous research examining supplier relationships (Wu & Lee, 2005; Wu et al., 2003, 2007): online communication practices (e-communication) and online purchases (e-procurement).

According to Wu and Lee (2005), e-communication can be defined “as the use of Internet technologies to link customers, suppliers, business partners, and employees using (a) intranets and enterprise communication portals, (b) customer service and customer relationship websites, (c) extranets and supply chain communication systems, and (d) IP electronic data interchange” (p. 8). In this research, we focus on the use of Internet technologies by the travel agency to interact with its suppliers for communication processes. E-procurement can be defined as “a B2B purchasing practice that utilizes electronic commerce to identify potential sources of supply, to purchase goods and service, to transfer payment, and to interact with suppliers” (Min & Galle, 2003, p. 3). In the context of travel agencies, we refer to the use of IT for making reservations and procuring e-tickets.

While some organizations adopt electronic business pro-actively in order to transform their business models, others only adopt support functions, such as communications (Srinivasan et al., 2002). Previous research suggests that different adoption levels exist (Lin & Lee, 2005). The first level is an initiation level in which firms begin to recognize the importance of e-business systems and prepare for website implementation. This level simply involves using Internet technology to access information and brochures. The second level

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