

# Analyzing channel choice: Direct and indirect e-Tourism distribution

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## KEYWORDS

Channel attributes; online channel choice; online tourism; situational variables

## Introduction

During the last decade service providers have moved onto online booking distribution channels, aiming to retain their existing customer bases and acquire new customers. To foster customer retention almost all service providers in the tourism sector have developed websites as direct online channels to facilitate direct bookings; they are also used as a basic instrument for customer management and retention programs to generate improvements in operational performance indicators and occupancy (Hua et al. 2018). Regarding new customer acquisition, providers have also intensified their presence in online indirect channels using Online Travel Agencies (OTAs) and other distribution platforms linked to their own webpages, as travelers are increasingly inclining their booking preferences towards OTAs (STR Consumer Travel Insight 2019). By increasing the number of online channels, service providers increase their bookings (Beritelli and Schegg 2016).

As a result of these two developments, most tourism service providers are now involved in multichannel operations combining a variety of direct and indirect channels (Stangl, Inversini, and Schegg 2016), with different impacts on revenues depending on type and combination of channels used (Lei, Nicolau, and Wang 2019). Moving bookings from the direct channel to the indirect channel, or vice versa, has an impact not only on

revenues and profits (Toh, Raven, and DeKay 2011) but also on customer acquisition and retention metrics. Past research suggests that service provider companies with high loyalty metrics in their customer base are less likely to use intermediaries (Koo, Mantin, and O'Connor 2011). It appears then that strategic decision-making about the number and types of distribution channels and the management of multichannel operations requires a clear view on why consumers make bookings on both online channels, direct and indirect.

Consumers' channel choice, except for the non-empirical study of Koo, Mantin, and O'Connor (2011), is almost unexplored in the tourism industry. Liu and Zhang (2014) provided an analysis of website choice in direct (hotels) and in indirect channels (OTAs), but not between direct and indirect channels. One research strand closely related to the choice of channel on which to make purchases is the choice of channel for information search before the purchase decision (Herrero, San Martin, and Hernandez 2015). However, the consumers' actual research shopping behavior involves numerous types of sources (online and offline) that are not distribution channels. An example would be Trivago, a search and price comparison site, which provides information on OTAs, hotel chains, and independent hotels. Consequently, to bridge this gap, the present research is focused on consumers' purchase booking behaviors, through the identification of drivers of consumer choice between online direct and indirect tourism distribution channels.

The next section provides a literature review that examines, from the customer perspective, the research gap in the channel choice between direct and indirect channels and proposes an empirical model to analyze the factors that determine channel choice. We then describe the empirical context, variables, survey and data. data, followed by the statistical presents the statistical methodology, the model estimation, and a discussion of the results. Finally, we synthesize the findings in terms of conclusions and suggestions for future research.

## Online tourism channel choice background

In the tourism industry, consumer online channel choice has focused mostly on intention to purchase on online channels (Bonsón, Carvajal, and Escobar 2015; Amaro and Duarte 2015), and on the customer's intention to adopt new technologies (Lee 2013), and less on the choice among the different alternative channels on which to make purchases (see Morosan and Bowen 2018, for a recent review). In the travel sector, Koo, Mantin, and O'Connor (2011) studied the role of online direct and indirect channels in this twofold strategy in airline companies, and Toh, Raven, and DeKay (2011), examining hotel companies, assessed the possibilities of combining the potential of indirect channels for selling using their own websites, from a customer retention perspective, with incentives for repeat purchases. In the hospitality industry, Liu and Zhang (2014) compared hotel websites and OTA channels, based on a consumer survey, which threw up interesting insights for channel choice. However, their aim was to analyze purchase intentions, not the choice of the actual channel through which to make the purchase.

Given this gap in the tourism research literature, the present study will focus mainly on the general distribution channels literature. More specifically, in the multichannel framework, consumers' choices among the available distribution channels have attracted the attention of researchers and provided some important findings (Melis

et al. 2015). With respect to the factors that explain these choices, past research has grouped them based on the following taxonomy: channel attributes, marketing incentives, inertia, individual differences, and situational factors (Neslin et al. 2006; Valentini, Montaguti, and Neslin 2011). Not all of them are relevant for all types of choices. Marketing incentives are used indiscriminately by individual companies, therefore, in the present scenario where there is a choice between two types of online channels, marketing incentives are not expected to play a part in the decision. The factor of individual differences covers those demographic and socioeconomic variables that may have an influence on channel choice. The literature has discussed the influence of these variables on the adoption of online channels (Amaro and Duarte 2013), but the results are not conclusive due to the high penetration of online shopping across genders, age groups, and educational and income levels. Hence, individual differences will not be considered in the model as a factor influencing the choice between two online channels. Inertia describes choice determined by habit (Anderson and Srinivasan 2003). In the distribution channel literature, there has been discussion about the changing role of habit on channel choice, depending on the number of previous experiences on the channel. Valentini, Montaguti, and Neslin (2011) argued that, as consumers make more choices, and accumulate experience and familiarity with channel choices, they rely less on habit and more on channel preferences. Concerning tourism products it is very uncertain that respondents would reliably report their past purchase behavior, classify- ing purchases made in the past months, or even years, based on the type of channel used. Hence, we do not explore the role of inertia at this point.

The set of channel attributes is the central pillar of these factors; this is the conglomerate of distribution services provided by companies in the channel to match consumer demand for their purchases. This is the key to consumer choice; for every purchase, they try to choose the most convenient alternative at the best price. In the context of our research, the choice between direct and indirect channels, we need to identify which distribution services are provided differently in the two types of channel and if this difference influences channel choice.

In the remainder of this section, the influence of those factors relevant to the present research context will be discussed, as will the pertinent propositions about their influence in the choice between direct and indirect channels. Figure 1 shows the factors included in the empirical model, potential antecedents of online tourism channel choice.

### *Channel attributes: distribution services at the retail level*

Distribution services are the purposive output of the distribution channel: the set of services demanded at different levels by end-users to purchase products effectively. When intermediate retailers and other companies selling directly to consumers set the level of distribution services, they determine the distribution costs that will be covered by the company and the costs to be borne by consumers in their purchasing activities. There is, therefore, an exchange in transaction or distribution costs between retailer and consumers (Betancourt et al. 2007).

According to Betancourt (2004), distribution services at the retail level are accessibility, information, assortment, assurance of product delivery (in form and time), and

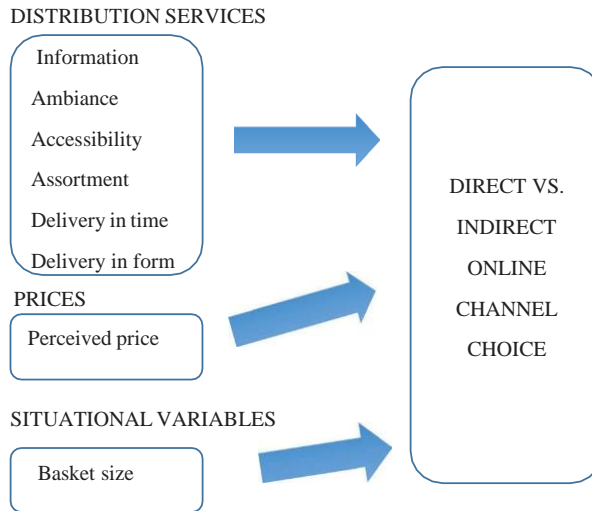


Figure 1. Factors influencing direct and indirect online channel choice.

ambiance. This list can be used transversally for all types of distribution channels; in particular, this allows the differentiation of distribution services from those channel attributes that are fixed for all consumers and purchase processes (channel policies and prices).

In the context of this research, the choice between direct and indirect online channels, the differences in the level of some distribution services delivered to customers are not expected to be relevant. As regards accessibility to their web pages, there may be differences among companies, but not associated to channel type. This circumstance can be extended to the ambiance of the web page; the functional and hedonic designs of company web pages are perceived differently, but the channel type doesn't determine differences. For the other three distribution services, the channel type may determine differences in the potential level of service provided to customers. As to information level, the company's direct channel should have an advantage in offering relevant product information to customers (Liu and Zhang 2014). Regarding the level of assortment, the intermediaries of indirect channels sell products from a varied portfolio of service providers, and should have an advantage in offering an assortment with greater breadth and depth (Stangl, Inversini, and Schegg 2016; Liu and Zhang 2014), and in the coordination of service bundles (Calveras and Orfila-Sintes 2019). The last is assurance of product delivery in time and in form. Regarding the delivery in time, the web page of service providers can give the booking confirmations directly in real time, while indirect channels may not always offer this. As to the assurance of product delivery in form, given that the product to be purchased is the booking, not the actual tourism products, this distribution service should be the same in both types of channels. Thus, the research propositions are as follow.

P1: Higher perceived levels of information service make the choice of the direct channel more likely.

P2: Higher perceived levels in assortment service make the choice of the indirect channel more likely.

P3: Higher perceived levels of service delivery in time make the choice of the direct channel more likely.

### *Channel attributes: prices*

To check differences in prices between direct and indirect channels involves consumers in low effort costs if the service provider sells through its own website. If the prices for one particular tourism product are consistently lower in the (in) direct channel, consumers will perceive that (in) direct channels have lower price levels. For the direct channel, if the shopping task is clearly and narrowly defined, and search plays a lesser role, the consumer will expect that direct purchases from the service provider are not burdened with intermediary mark-ups and consequently the price will be lower. When this is the case, direct channels should be perceived as a cheaper alternative to indirect channels. However, in the current context, there are disturbances in the supply and the demand sides that make it difficult to ensure this direct relationship between the actual prices charged by companies and the price level perceived by consumers.

On the supply side, one major problem is the lack of consistency in the actual price differences between direct and indirect channels. In the hotel industry, relying on observed price data, Gazzoli, Kim, and Palakurthi (2008) showed that in their home market, the USA, large chains offered lower prices on their own websites than OTAs for the same rooms and dates. However, in their foreign hotels, some OTAs were selling bookings at prices below the offers on the hotels' own websites. On the demand side, relying on the consumers' perceptions of price level, two difficulties arise. First, when the shopping task is open to a variety of product alternatives, the perception of price levels is necessarily more subjective, and OTAs are believed to provide the final consumers with cheaper solutions (Kim, Bojanic, and Warnick 2009). Second, in indirect channels, the prices set by intermediaries might be perceived on a value-added scale rather than in strict monetary terms. Where consumers have incomplete information about the final tourism product, they might accept paying higher prices to intermediaries if they provide supplementary information and assurance (Nicolau 2013). In this uncertain scenario, given that this study deals with consumers' price perceptions, it is expected that OTAs will be perceived to provide lower priced options – very explicitly emphasized in their marketing communication strategy; this leads to the following proposition:

P4: Lower perceived prices are more likely to be associated with indirect channels.

### *Situational variables*

In every shopping process, there are specific circumstances, not directly related to channel attributes, which may affect channel choice. Situational variables include: the physical environment (crowds, weather, store environment), temporal variables (time, day, urgency), the social setting (presence of others, interaction), antecedent states (physical or mental

states, mood), and task definition variables (motivation, type of product, product categories in the shopping basket) (Chocarro, Cortiñas, and Villanueva 2013). When the choice is only among online channels, these situational factors lose much of their potential influence on the choice decision. This is particularly the case with the first four types (physical environment, temporal issues, social setting, and antecedent states), which are rarely important concerns in the online shopping process.

The exception is task definition, which has been found to be an important determinant of channel choice (Neslin et al. 2006). To a great extent, the most important issue in task definition is the shopping basket, the products or product categories to be purchased. In the current research context, basket size will be considered as a situational variable that influences channel choice. In the purchase of tourism products, the larger the basket is in terms of product variety and financial cost, the more complex is the task: the search and purchase processes require more assistance and assurance. Considering the extent to which intermediaries in indirect channels may provide services that reduce the burden of complexity, the proposition is:

P5: Consumers purchasing large baskets are more likely to choose indirect channels.

### Empirical context

Distribution channels in the tourism industry in Spain have gone through a profound transformation over the last two decades, in parallel with the global evolution of distribution structures fostered by Information and Communication Technologies (ITCs). The most important consequences are the dominant positions of online channels and the pervasiveness of customer use of the Internet in different formats in the search-purchase-post-purchase process. The present study is focused on internet users who purchase tourism services.

The database consisted of 445 valid cross-section responses from a panel of digital consumers managed by a market research company. The prerequisite for the selection of respondents was that they should have made at least one online purchase in the previous year. Questionnaires were rejected from 30 respondents who failed to identify the company name related to their last purchase. They were also asked to state if this company was an OTA or a service provider. Of the 415 remaining questionnaires, 397 had no missing values for the variables included in the empirical model.

The sample selection was made on the basis of representativeness of the digital consumer population purchasing tourism services online. The genders were balanced, and age and education levels reflected the demographic bias of internet users: there was a lower percentage of older consumers and a higher education level (Table 1).

The questionnaire was designed to gather information from online shoppers of tourism products on their individual characteristics; as regards to their last purchase, their perceptions of the services and resources provided by the companies' websites; their evaluation of the purchase process; and other attitudes and behaviors concerning online shopping. The participants were asked to evaluate the adequacy of the purchase-related services and policies on a Likert-type scale, from completely inadequate (0), to completely adequate (10). The same 0–10 scale was used for prices, from much more

**Table 1.** Sample demographics (%).

Gender	Male	51.4
	Female	48.6
Age (years)	18-30	27.8
	31-55	48
	Above 55	24.2
Education	Elementary	1.0
	Secondary, first level	15.2
	Secondary, second level	21
	Uncompleted university	10.8
	Bachelor degree	42.5
	Postgraduate degree	9.4

expensive (0), to much cheaper (10). The 0–10 scale, which has been previously used in the distribution channel literature (Betancourt et al. 2007), has statistical advantages over other Likert-type scales with 7 or 5 intervals; it is also more convenient for the respondents as they are familiar with using it for a wide variety of evaluations and judgments. Basket size was measured as the financial cost of the last purchase (in euros). Table 2 shows the descriptive statistics of the variables.

### Model estimation and discussion of results

As the variable to be explained is the choice between two alternatives, direct and indirect channels, a Probit model is used for the estimation. The dependent-binary variable ( $y$ ) has the probability of two options:  $\Pr(y = 1|x)$  or  $\Pr(y = 0|x)$ , which depend on the values of dependent variables represented by a lineal combination ( $x_i\beta$ ). The specification of the model is  $\Pr(y = 1|x) = \Pr(y^* > 0) = F(x_i\beta)$ , where  $x_i$  is the independent variables ( $i = 1, \dots, n$ ). A binary response model was estimated through the Maximum Likelihood (ML) method.

The research context shapes the findings displayed in Table 3 about the predicted influence of the antecedents. The analysis was restricted to the choice of the channel in which the consumers completed their purchase, that is, previous search stages were not covered.

The estimation of the model shows that two variables have a clear impact on channel choice: assortment and basket size. They are associated but have an independent effect on channel choice (if basket size is excluded, the coefficient of assortment is 0.268, a negligible difference). A third variable, the information distribution service, has the

**Table 2.** Descriptive statistics of the variables.

Variable	Mean	Scale
Distribution Services		0-10
Information	7.90	
Ambiance	7.54	
Accessibility	8.17	
Assortment	7.61	
Delivery in time	7.82	
Delivery in form	7.77	
Situational variables		€
Basket size (in 100 €)	5.40	
Prices		0-10
Price compared to other online offers	7.19	

**Table 3.** Estimation of the probit model for channel choice (direct channel: 0; indirect channel: 1).

Variable	Coefficient	Standard Error	t	Significance
Constant	0.269	0.518	0.519	0.604
Distribution Services				
Information	-0.247*	0.127	-1.950	0.051
Ambiance	0.187	0.121	1.545	0.122
Accessibility	0.012	0.066	0.185	0.853
Assortment	0.250***	0.066	3.782	0.000
Delivery in time	-0.127	0.084	-1.525	0.127
Delivery in form	0.027	0.077	0.351	0.723
Prices				
Price level	-0.039	0.064	-0.604	0.546
Situational variable				
Basket size	0.099***	0.027	3.699	0.000

\*\*\* Significance level <0.01.

\* Significance level <0.1.

expected negative coefficient indicating, as proposed, a higher probability of choosing the direct channel. However, it shows a weaker probability of being determinant in the channel choice.

Of the distribution services, assortment and information reflect the major difference between the two channels. For purchases in the indirect channel, intermediaries play their distinctive role of providing product variety in breadth and width, an advantage sought by consumers. In the tourism sector, consumers appreciate a wide variety of products that can be used in combination (accommodation + travel + car rental), and the wide variety of alternatives for each product type (i.e. accommodation of different categories and locations at the destination). For direct channels, service providers selling directly through their own websites are shown to have the ability to provide good product information. Propositions P1 and P2 are supported.

However, propositions P3 and P4 are not supported. Certainly, price is a crucial determinant in the choice of the website on which the actual purchase is made, but online channel type doesn't make any difference. The operation of intermediaries in online channels leads to price levels with little difference from service providers.

The choice of a direct or an indirect channel for purchasing tourism products is based on only those elements that offer clear (dis) advantages between the two. In the tourism market, consumers devote a large part of the total purchase process to the search stage because each purchase is framed in a very different set of circumstances. Partly because the shopping task is heterogeneous through time, and partly because offerings are expected to change from purchase to purchase, consumers need to acquire information for every purchase occasion. Prior to the selection of the channel to make the booking, they have explored the different options. In these instances, consumers optimize their choices by purchasing on the best channel in terms of the service level required for the particular purchase. This circumstance contributes to equalize the evaluation that respondents make of the services rendered by the two types of channels. The results obtained suggest that the assurance of delivery in time and perceived price are optimized by consumers in their choices to achieve the appropriate fit for each purchase. This optimization across channel type is less likely to take place for information and



assortment as in any purchase, the direct channel has a clear advantage in information and the indirect an advantage in assortment.

Finally, basket size, a situational variable, points clearly to the suitability of OTAs for capturing high purchase volumes because they provide one-stop shopping when a variety of products is sought and they handle better the complexity and risk reduction implicit in high-cost transactions. Therefore, proposition P5 is supported.

## Conclusions

OTAs and service providers seek to develop competitive advantages to get larger shares of sales volume and transactions. As e-commerce is becoming increasingly dominant in the tourism market, online channels have become the basic battleground in this competition. This research analyzes, from the customer perspective, the potential advantages that direct and indirect channels have in pursuing customer acquisition. With this purpose, the analysis has centered on factors influencing channel choice, direct vs. indirect.

The findings of the present study differ from past research into channel choice involving offline channels in that only some of the hypothesized determinants were found to be significant in the choice between direct and indirect online channels. Compared to offline channels, the internet operations of service providers and intermediaries mitigate the differences between direct and indirect channels from the demand perspective. This study finds that this approach relies on two major factors, distribution services and price levels. For distribution services, the explanation of this trend is based on the fact that the Internet allows for their separation in time and space. This separation provides companies with online distribution channels the potential to deliver high levels of distributions services at low cost. The results of the present study show that only two distribution services – assortment and information – are perceived differently depending on channel type. For perceived price level, the explanation is based on the dominant pricing practices by intermediaries in the online channels that restrict the ability of service providers to offer significantly lower prices in their online sales.

Of the factors found significant in channel choice, assortment is the distribution service which differentiates direct and indirect channels: it is the most distinctive attribute and the basic rationale behind the role of the intermediary. Indirect channels allow consumers to make a convenient one-stop purchase in which different tourism products are combined and coordinated. Whether purchasing in one product category or in a variety of categories, consumers clearly perceived this advantage of the indirect channel. The direct channels have some advantage in terms of information services given that service providers are specialists in the product/service area and can deliver all information needs. However, more interestingly, the finding that large baskets are associated with indirect channels reinforces the position of OTAs in capturing multi-product purchases and in which they have a competitive advantage.

## *Managerial implications*

As to the managerial implications for customer acquisition, service providers need to rely on OTAs to attract new customers, particularly in the case of small, independent service

providers. OTA sites allow service providers to enter the market and help customers to locate their premises. However, this comes at a cost, as profit margins from intermediated bookings are lower, so service providers have to find a balance between direct and indirect bookings. The dilemma for the average-sized or independent service provider is whether it is worth investing in its own marketing channels or to embrace the efficient OTAs' operations. To exploit their advantages in terms of information services, providers should invest in delivering specific informative details, helpful for potential clients, about their products on their websites. To overcome their natural deficit in terms of assortment, service providers' websites should provide a wider range of complementary product categories from other service providers that are commonly combined in large basket size transactions: lodging, vehicle rentals, transport, destination services, tickets, and insurance. This approach is already being taken by service specialists, such as airline companies that provide access to the websites of other service providers, that is, hotels, car rentals, and even OTAs for services at the destination.

### *Limitations and future research recommendations*

This study is exclusively focused on online channels, but the multichannel operations of service providers and OTAs include in most cases alternative offline channels. As such, there is an interdependency between offline and online channels that needs to be considered in future research in order to offer a complete perspective of customer acquisition and retention. The present study makes some logical managerial recommendations about offline channel operations, but we cannot go any further because of the aforementioned offline-online interactivity. Future research should address omnichannel consumers' behavior, including offline channels, to analyze how they interact with online channels and the consequences for the potential for customer acquisition and retention strategies.

### **Acknowledgments**

We also acknowledge the support of the Crevalor Research Group.

### **Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

### **Funding**

This work was supported by the Ministry of Economy of Spain under Grant ECO2015-65393-R, and by the University of Zaragoza under Grant UZ2018-SOC-04.

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