eTourism: A comparison of Online and Offline Bookings and the Importance of Hotel Attributes

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Abstract

Internet is an important tool for information searching and purchasing of products especially in tourism. This paper investigates the impact of demographic and travel characteristics of hotel guests on online and offline reservations. It also examines the importance of hotel attributes in selecting a hotel and the differences in priorities between guests who book their accommodation online and offline. Data was collected by surveys of guests in three hotels in Dubrovnik. The results of the study showed that the method of booking mostly depends on the nature of travel, and that the importance of hotel attributes does not differ much between different groups of guests.

Keywords: Internet, online reservation, hotel selection factors, tourism

1.　Introduction

Tourism is one of the fastest growing industries worldwide and, in general, the Internet continues to gain importance in the tourism sector [6]. Since the 1980s, Information Communication Technologies (ICT) have been transforming tourism globally [7]. Information is a crucial factor in the planning, booking and during the travel, and sometimes even after that. Because of this, tourism is one of the industries on which the rapid changes in technology over the last twenty years have had the greatest impact. The important role of information in tourism is followed by the important role of applying information technology in tourism. The use of information technology, in particular, has grown from the viewpoint of the customers (tourists). It can be considered as one of the most influential technologies that changes the behavior of tourists. While the number of Internet users worldwide is constantly growing and reaches 1.7 billion [14], the diffusion of information technologies has improved the offer of tourist services in terms of efficiency, quality and flexibility. In a global travel market estimated at roughly $850 billion, $216 billion, or 25%, is booked online in the U.S., Western Europe and Asia Pacific, so more than half a trillion dollars in global travel sales is still waiting to be booked online [16]. Currently, there is a large increase in the number of users who book directly on hotel websites [15].

Although the Internet is an important tool for information searching and purchasing of products, customers still use different sales channels in their decision-making. Generally, some of the customers who look for information online, end up doing the purchasing offline. The same goes for tourism - the majority of online customers use multiple ways of purchasing their travel products. With the enormous amount of information potentially available to travelers, the Internet has become an important platform for information exchange between the consumer and suppliers (e.g., hotels, transportation sectors, attractions) or intermediaries (e.g., travel agents, destination marketing organizations) [38].

Internet has changed the tourist services users' behavior [28]. The search process is now longer than it has ever been—people are searching an average of 22 travel websites before making a booking (Google), communicating with friends and family via Facebook, conducting mobile search, etc. [34]. This means that they are seeing hotel marketing messages across a variety of different channels. Travelers have direct access to much larger sources of information, tourist organizations, private corporations and other users. Many travelers search for information on travel, buying airplane tickets online, online booking of accommodation and other facilities, rather than relying on travel agencies to do it for them. Due to the popularity of Internet applications, most travel organizations, such as hotels, airlines and travel agencies, introduced Internet technology as part of their marketing and communication strategies.

But just having a website does not guarantee that potential or current guests will be attracted to the site [17]. Research findings show that the hotels are not utilizing the Internet to its full potential and effectively e-marketing their hotels regardless of the hotel type [5]. In order to improve the quality of online services, it is necessary to continuously adapt the online marketing strategy to the needs of customers, based on measurements of their satisfaction and experience and on characteristics of their behavior. There is an increasing number of research papers that deal with the issue of the quality of travel websites, in order to identify their essential elements and develop a successful website in a new tourism e-business environment. Customer satisfaction with websites that offer tourist services (hotels, agencies, booking systems, etc.) affect their choice in the way of buying these services. Yet there is a scarcity of more comprehensive studies on customers' online purchase behaviors despite the increasingly important role of information technology in the hotel industry [18]. There are probably many factors that influence the use of the Internet to search for information and/or reservations and purchasing that should be investigated.

The aim of this study is to examine the impact of demographic and travel characteristics of travelers on the way they book accommodation, as well as the importance of various attributes of hotels for making travelers' decisions about choosing the hotel, so as to apply this knowledge in creating better online marketing strategies for hotels.

2.   Literature review

2.1.   The impact of Internet on hotel bookings

Electronic sales in the travel industry started their development long before terms such as B2C and B2B emerged because products and services related to travel are ideal for electronic sale. Travel booking is based on information as a result of the characteristics of tourism products: intangibility, heterogeneity and geographic fixation. Both sides of the tourist market, supply and demand, recognized that and their interest pushed the development of many forms of electronic distribution in tourism.

The Internet has enabled organizations to distribute products both through direct distribution and through a network of channels. Intermediaries involve online travel agencies, as well as search engines, which are able to distribute static and dynamic information, like availability and prices. Electronic intermediaries have grown dynamically, forcing all tourist organizations to think about changing business models and value chains. Using Web solutions, the booking sales cycle often includes various intermediaries on the path from the supplier (hotel) to the buyer (customer), resulting in the emergence of the negative aspects of increased technological capabilities. In some cases, the number of intermediaries between hotel room and guest would climb up to five, making the distribution more complex and expensive [11]. Because of that, service providers must carefully choose the appropriate booking channel or combination of booking channels, not neglecting their own website and direct online marketing. Most hotels use booking opportunities through their own website increasingly (Figure 1), saving money on agency commissions, but in such a case, it is more difficult to reach out to the guests.
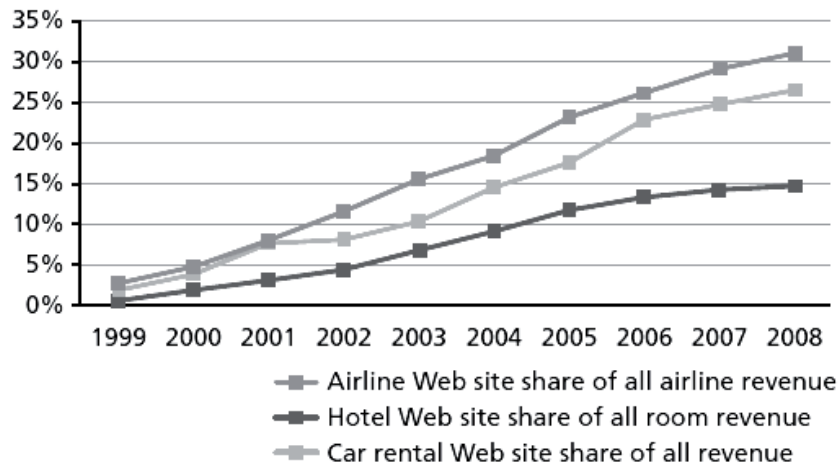
Figure 1. U.S. airline, hotel and car rental website share of all category revenue, 1999-2008[1]

For the past three years, Hospitality eBusiness Strategies, Inc. (HeBS), a leading global management consultancy company in the field of Internet marketing in hospitality, has been carrying out research which monitors U.S. and Western Europe hoteliers' investments in Internet marketing. One of the main findings of the latest benchmark survey on hotel internet marketing [13] showed that the hotel business intentions in year 2009 gave a great advantage to online marketing and embraced the Internet as the most cost-effective tool in generating revenue. But almost half of the respondents believe that their hotel is not making use of online marketing to its full potential, primarily due to lack of internal resources and knowledge of an area that is developing very dynamically. In 2010, the online channel remains the only growth channel where the direct online channel should be at the centerpiece of hotel Internet strategy because travel consumers booking via hotel website i.e. direct customers are more loyal, bring more revenue and tend to travel more often [34].

Internet allows travelers to access reliable and accurate information, as well as the possibility of making reservations in much less time, and with less expenses and inconveniences than required by conventional methods. The development of ICT and especially the Internet has created "new" tourists, who have become aware of and are looking for a value for their money and time. They are less interested in following the masses in tourist packages and much more eager in satisfying their own priorities and timetables. Potential tourists are becoming more independent and sophisticated with a wide range of tools for planning a journey. This includes the reservation systems and online travel agencies (like Expedia and Fastbooking), Internet search engines (like Google), destination management systems (Tiscover), social networks (like Facebook and Twitter) and Web 2.0 portals (such as Wayn and TripAdvisor), sites for comparing prices (such as Kelkoo, hotelreservation.com, hotelium.com), as well as individual pages of the suppliers and intermediaries. As a substantial portion of online room reservations continues to be accounted for by the third-party websites, hotels have been making great efforts to attract travelers to book rooms directly on hotel-owned websites [20]. To succeed in this, hotels need to understand under what circumstances their customers adopt reservation websites for their travel arrangements. There have been numerous attempts to understand users' adoption of the new electronic distribution channels in the hotel industry among which two main directions have been delineated: (1) online information search as part of the decision making process and (2) online purchase intentions and channel choice [29]. Like in other e-business application areas, hotel website users can be broadly classified into browsers (lookers) and purchasers (buyers) [21]. The quality of the website has a direct and positive impact on customer satisfaction and intention to purchase online [4], so it is necessary for travel and hotel companies to make their

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[1] Source: PhoCusWright Inc.

customers satisfied, so as to make them e-buyers, and not only e-searchers. By perfectly meeting customers' information needs about products and services prior to purchase, the hotel industry is benefiting from information technology, especially from online reservation, in satisfying customer expectations, in improving service, in increasing revenue, and in decreasing costs [33].

Research on website effectiveness and e-shopping has followed several themes: one theme was based on content analysis of websites and descriptive analysis regarding online users, while other research concentrated on principles developed from human factors research in computer interface design [18]. Among the many factors affecting the website effectiveness, the following findings are important for the motivation for this study. Morosan and Jeong [29] found in their study that, among other factors, detailed information about the property enhanced attitudes and intentions to use reservation websites. Rong et al. [32] suggest that hotel managers should pay attention to the following dimensions and provide the information that is considered as the most important: reservations information, facilities information and contact information. Therefore, this study aims to focus on investigating the importance of certain hotel attributes for customers that booked online to find the appropriate information that should be placed online to enhance online reservations.

2.2. Hotel attributes in the hotel selection decision

Hotel attributes are services and facilities that hotels offer, whose features affect the customer and his choice among different products [23]. These attributes that directly affect the decision-making are 'determining attributes': they can cause a desire to buy and differentiate this desire in relation to the competition offer [1]. Perceptions of hotel attributes can be defined as the degree of importance that tourists attach to a variety of hotel services and facilities in meeting their wants and needs [40]. The results of various studies indicate that guests, when choosing a hotel, select location, price of accommodation or value for money, quality of service, cleanliness, security, hotel's physical attractiveness and hotel reputation as important attributes ([2], [3], [22], [31], [39]).

In other studies of guests' behavior during hotel selection, the differences in the priorities of choosing factors between the different types of guests were examined. Many studies have examined the difference between business and leisure guests. They suggest that the business guests put cleanliness and location in first place ([25], [27], [36]), while the leisure guests choose safety, personal contact and accommodation prices as the most important factors ([8], [24] , [26], [30]).

From the aforementioned, it can be concluded that hotel attributes have different value in selecting a hotel. There are factors that are important to all guests, but there are differences in priorities between different kinds of guests. When analyzing the importance of hotel attributes for hotel selection decision, one should consider at least two aspects of the attributes from the customers point of view: experienced and presented. *Experienced attributes* would be those that the guest has experienced during his or her stay at the hotel. These attributes can influence guests return to the same hotel. *Presented attributes* are those that the guest has not experienced because he or she has never stayed in a particular hotel so they are only presented to the potential guest through different channels of communication. Attributes such as personal contact or cleanliness are usually better evaluated when experienced, while location and price can be easily presented. Considering the two aspects, for the purpose of this study which is to help in developing hotel online marketing strategy, we have chosen to question the importance of the hotel attributes that that can be best presented online: location, price, wellness facilities, special offers, broadband internet and meeting rooms.

2.3. Market segmentation regarding the differences of online customers

It is important to observe how Internet is used in many ways for different marketing segments. Comprehending how different marketing segments understand different tourism products and services increases the possibility of presenting the suitable product. The process

of understanding available market segments and determining if these segments fit the goals of a business has long been a critical task and major challenge for hospitality practitioners and researchers [12]. Segmentation is a process of dividing a market into distinct groups of customers who prefer similar experiences or marketing service mixes [37]. The basis of segmentation generally includes various tourists characteristics such as demographics, socio-economic factors, geographic location, and product related behavioral characteristics such as purchase behavior, consumption behavior and preference for attractions, experiences and services [10].

In the contemporary tourist market Internet serves as an innovative tool to reach customers and offer travel-related products. But despite the growing online market, hotels are still searching for an efficient way to persuade travelers to reserve rooms directly on hotel owned websites since a substantial proportion of online room reservations are made through the third-party websites. Since, to date, the tourist's decision process of the reservation channel choice is not completely understood, the differences in various characteristics of tourists should be examined so to efficiently segment the market and enhance hotel distribution.

In the study on consumer behavior in e-tourism [35] the Model of e-Tourism Usage was built to examine the determinants that influence potential travelers to use the Internet for travel planning. The discovered constructs that influence consumer's choice to use the Internet as their travel planning channel are: evaluation of the website, travel motivation, trip features, experience with e-commerce and/or e-tourism, Internet affinity, self-efficacy, involvement and trust. A study [19] that examined the differences between demographic and behavioral characteristics of customers who purchased products online and offline found that they differ in regard to their age, educational background, weekly browser usage, the number of years of Internet use and their past online purchasing experience. Authors suggested that in future studies property characteristics and customers' cultural background should be considered. Although the above mentioned study did not find any significant differences between male and female purchasers, gender has been and continues to be one of the most common forms of segmentation used by marketers which is confirmed by another study [9] that found substantial gender differences both in terms of attitudes to information channels and travel website functionality preferences. Another important aspect of differences between customers to be investigated is the purpose of their trip. In the study on Chinese hotel customers purchase intentions [18] authors notice that results should not be generalized for all travel purposes because hotel customers' online reservation behavior patterns and their needs for information about products and services might differ according to the reason for their travel (business or leisure).

Drawing on these conclusions, we aim to investigate how demographic and travel characteristic of five-star hotel guests affect their choice of the reservation method and the importance of the hotel attributes in the hotel selection decision. This way we try to find the relationship between important determinants of market segment characteristics and the online reservations.

3. Methodology

For the purpose of this study, survey data were collected from the customers in three hotels in Croatia and analyzed. The questionnaire included two main sections. The first section of the questionnaire was designed to obtain demographic and traveling characteristic of the respondents (gender, age, nationality, reservation method, nature of visit). The second part of the questionnaire consisted of 6 hotel attributes, for which the guests had to rate the importance when choosing a hotel, and of 6 hotel areas, for which guests were asked to rate the importance of having the access to broadband Internet in those areas. The 6 hotel attributes were identified based on a review of relevant literature and based on the aims of this particular study. The 6 hotel areas were identified based on the typical areas hotels consist of.

The questionnaire was structured so that each hotel attribute and each hotel area were rated using a 10-point scale, ranging from 1, as least important, to 10, most important. To capture a wider range of respondents, the questionnaire was printed in English.

The sample of guests in this study included international and domestic guests who stayed in the Excelsior, Bellevue and Dubrovnik Palace hotels during April and May 2009. All three hotels are 5 star hotels and are situated in Dubrovnik – one of the main tourist centers in Croatia. The questionnaires were distributed in hotel rooms and generated a total of 181 responses.

4.   Results and discussion

Table 1 shows the demographic and travel characteristics of visitors. The age of 50 represents a line that divides respondents in two (55 percent are younger than 50, and 45 percent older) which makes a substantial share of the older guests. According to gender, respondents are equally represented with slightly higher percentages in favor of the male population (58%). The largest proportion of respondents originate from the countries of Western Europe (almost 40%), followed by the rest of Europe with 20 percent, the United States with 16 percent, Croatia with 15 percent, and the rest of the world with 8 percent. The most represented booking method among the respondents is reservation through a travel agent with about 40 percent, while second and third place, being very close, are the Internet (27.5%) and own company (28.1%). A very small share, typically, belongs to 'walk in' guests (3%). For more than half of the respondents the reason for travel is a conference (57%). After that followed respondents whose nature of visit is leisure (27%), 10.7 percent of respondents make group tours, and only 5 percent are on an ordinary business trip.

Age		Country of residence		Gender	
<20	0,6%	Croatia	15,4%	Male	58,0%
21 - 30	11,7%	Western Europe	39,5%	Female	42,0%
31 - 40	23,9%	Europe - other	20,4%		
41 - 50	18,3%	USA	16,0%		
>51	45,6%	Other	8,6%		

Type of reservation		Nature of visit	
Internet	27,5%	Conference	57,3%
Travel agent	41,3%	Business travel	5,1%
Own comapny	28,1%	Group tour	10,7%
"Walk in"	3,0%	Leisure	27,0%

Table 1. Demographic and traveling characteristics of the respondents

4.1.   Booking methods with respect to the nature of visit

A more detailed analysis of booking methods with regard to the nature of visit is shown in the Figures 2-5 to get further information about the guests who book on the Internet.

Respondents, whose nature of visit was the conference (Figure 2), booked accommodation at the hotel mostly through travel agencies and their own companies (almost 80 percent). However, the percentage of those who had booked over the Internet is not negligible (20%).
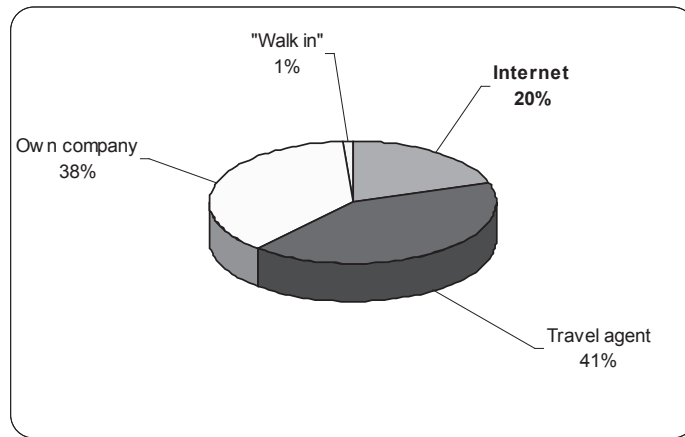
Figure 2. Booking methods share - nature of visit: conference

Respondents, who were on regular business trips (Figure 3), booked in only two ways: through travel agencies or their own companies. Not a single customer booked through the Internet.
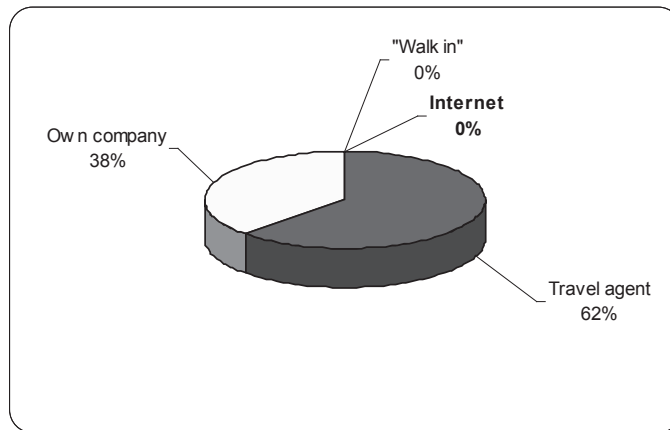

Figure 3. Booking methods share - nature of visit: business trip

Respondents, who belong to the group tours (Figure 4), in the large majority booked through travel agencies (about 70 percent). This type of guests do not book online as they do not search for accommodation individually.
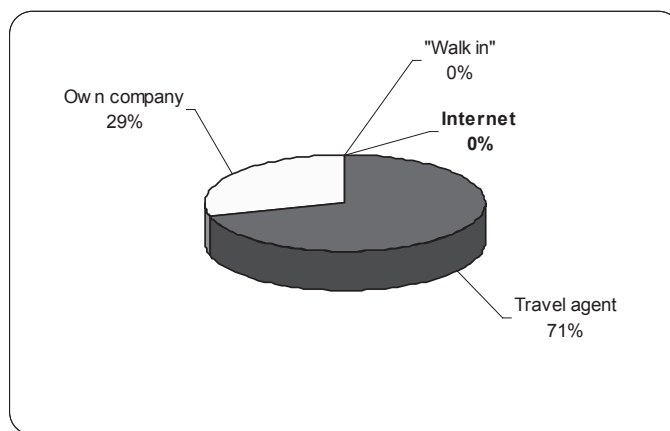

Figure 4. Booking methods share - nature of visit: group tour

The largest share of bookings through the Internet were made by guests whose nature of visit was leisure (Figure 5) - even 62 percent of their reservations had been made online.
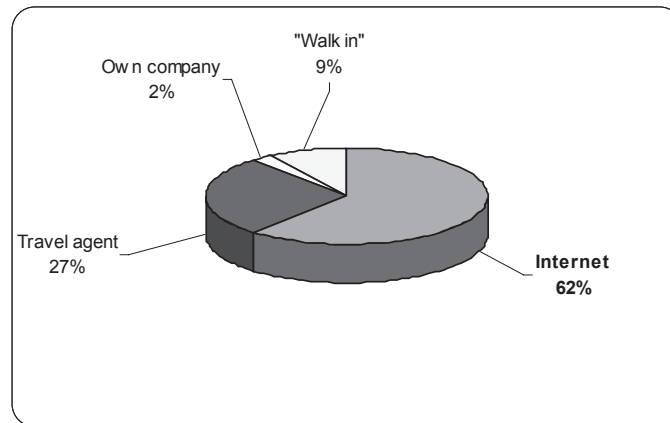

Figure 5. Booking methods share - nature of visit: leisure

4.2. Booking methods with respect to the demographic characteristics of the respondents

Table 2 shows the shares of each booking method with respect to the demographic characteristics of the respondents.

	Internet	Travel agent	Own company	"Walk in"
GENDER				
Male	23,7%	41,2%	32,0%	3,1%
Female	31,9%	42,0%	23,2%	2,9%
AGE				
21 - 30	30,0%	40,0%	20,0%	10,0%
31 - 40	31,6%	34,2%	34,2%	0,0%
41 - 50	21,9%	34,4%	43,8%	0,0%
>51	26,7%	48,0%	21,3%	4,0%
COUNTRY OF RESIDENCE				
Croatia	4,0%	52,0%	32,0%	12,0%
Western Europe	40,7%	28,8%	27,1%	3,4%
Europe - other	17,2%	41,4%	41,4%	0,0%
USA	11,1%	88,9%	0,0%	0,0%
Other	34,6%	38,5%	26,9%	0,0%

Table 2. Booking methods with respect to the demographic characteristics of the respondents

Bookings between women and men do not differ significantly. The share of online reservations amongst women is somewhat bigger (about 32%) than amongst men (23%).

Considering the age of the respondents, who booked over the Internet, we can conclude that the differences between the age groups are not great. The smallest share of online reservations belongs to the age group 41 to 50 years (22%), and the biggest share of online reservations belongs to respondents aged 31 to 40 years. No age group had an extremely low or extremely high share of online reservations.

Differences between the share of online bookings by the countries of origin of respondents were somewhat larger, but one should be particularly alert to the small sample size of some of the groups (e.g. there were only 14 respondents from the USA). Most online reservations come from the countries of Western Europe (40%), and least from Croatia (4%).

From the data on the demographic characteristics of respondents and the ways of booking, we did not recognize any important indicators of the specificities of guests who book their accommodation at the hotel over the Internet.

4.3. The importance of broadband Internet for hotel selection

The respondents rated each hotel attribute using a 10-point scale, ranging from 1, least important to 10, most important. Table 3 shows the arithmetic mean values of the rated attributes. According to the data, the most important factor, when choosing the hotel, is the price of accommodation with a very high mean value of the importance grades (8.7). The importance of broadband Internet services in the hotel is on the next to last place with the grade 6.5.

Hotel attributes (selection factors)	Importance rate	
	Mean[a]	St.Dev.
Accomodation rates	8,7	2,0
Hotel location	8,2	2,1
Wellness & Spa	7,1	2,8
Special offers	6,9	2,7
Broadband Internet	6,5	3,0
Meeting rooms	5,8	3,5

[a] *Mean scale: 1 - least important to 10 - most important*

Table 3. Mean ratings of hotel attributes importance

Furthermore, we wanted to examine whether the importance of broadband Internet for hotel selection decision depends on the characteristics of guests and whether it is perhaps higher with guests who book through the Internet. Figure 6 shows a comparison of arithmetic mean values of importance of hotel selection factors between groups of respondents who had booked online and those who did not. The results show that for the respondents who have booked accommodation through the Internet, the importance of broadband Internet in the hotel is somewhat less important (6.74) than for those who did not book through the Internet (7.29).
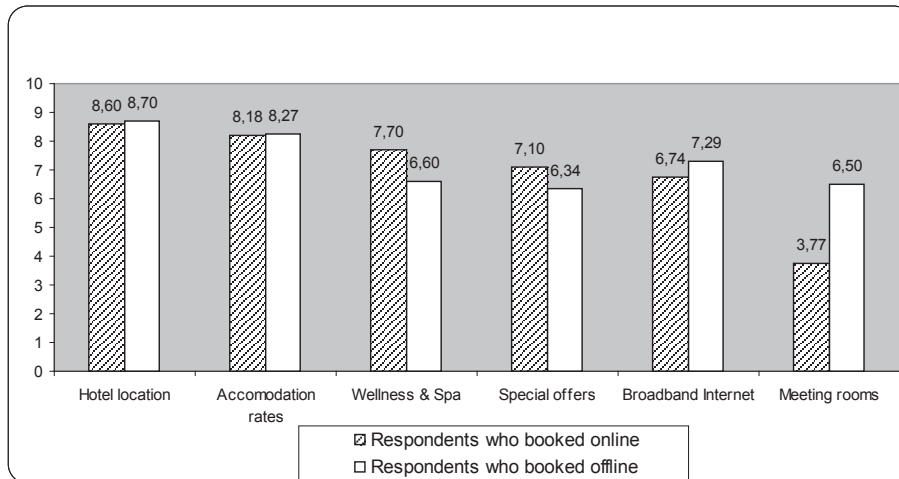

Figure 6. Comparison of hotel selection factors (attributes) importance ratings

4.4.   The importance of broadband Internet in various hotel areas

Respondents evaluated the importance of access to broadband internet in different hotel areas in the following way: the most important is Internet access in rooms (average grade 8.8), then in the lobby of the hotel (7.1). In the restaurant (5.6), bar (5.2), at the pool (4.9) and beach (4.7) the importance is medium and almost equal (Table 4).

Hotel area	Importance rate	
	Mean[a]	St.Dev.
Rooms	8,8	2,5
Lobby	7,1	3,0
Restaurant	5,6	3,5
Bar	5,2	3,6
Indoor pool	4,9	3,5
Beach Area	4,7	3,5

[a] *Mean scale: 1 - least important to 10 - most important*

Table 4. Mean ratings of broadband Internet in various hotel areas

If we compare the mean values of importance grades for broadband Internet in various hotel areas between respondents who have booked accommodation through the Internet and those who did not (Figure 7), we see that the grades are generally equal, and in most cases lower for respondents who had booked online.
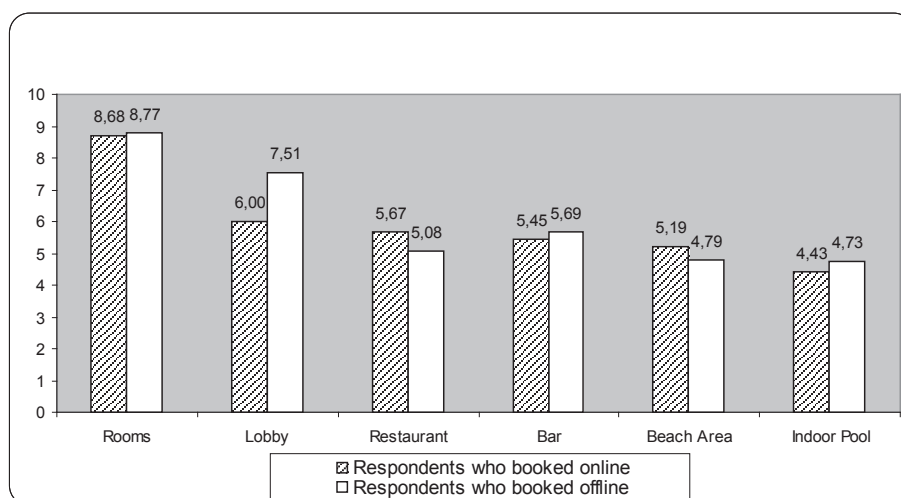

Figure 7. Comparison of broadband Internet importance ratings

5.   Conclusion

This study investigated the differences in booking methods compared to demographic and travel characteristics of the hotel guests and the importance of broadband Internet, also in relation to demographic and travel characteristics of the guests, as well as booking methods.

Regarding the booking methods we aimed to investigate the characteristics of the guests who book through the Internet. Out of the total number of respondents, 27.5 percent booked the accommodation online, which is a significant share of the total reservations, although that percentage takes the third place among four possible booking methods. Guests who have booked accommodation through the Internet do not significantly differ by gender and age, and concerning the origin of respondents, there is a significant difference in favor of Western Europe countries. The booking method significantly depends on the nature of travel, so

respondents who were on a business trip or group tour, did not book through the Internet; guests whose reason for visits was a conference largely booked through the Internet (20 percent), as well as more than half of the leisure guests who were on holiday.

The research showed that broadband Internet service is of medium importance when choosing the hotel, and the service is valued equally both by respondents, who booked through the Internet, and those who did not. Apart from broadband Internet service, other hotel attributes were also valued similarly important by respondents who had booked online, and those who did not. It is surprising that the hotel rate is equally important to all the guests, since this is often assumed to be more important to guests who book online searching for the best price.

Based on these results, the hotel online strategy should be based on tourists' market segments according to the nature of travel, taking into account that these groups showed the greatest differences considering online booking.

Several limitations of this study should be taken into consideration when interpreting the results and developing future research. The first limitation is associated with the nature of sample and data collection. The results cannot be generalized to all hotel customers since the respondents were guests of the three upscale hotels that are part of the same hotel chain company and situated in the same town on the Adriatic coast. The research should therefore be extended to a larger number of hotels covering different classes and locations. Also, the survey was conducted during April and May 2009, thus the respondents may not be truly representative since these months are not a part of the main season period and the customers may have different behavior from those at other times of the year. It should also be noted that the year 2009 was a year of the global crisis that affected tourism deeply. In the surveyed hotels, occupancy rates fell significantly and that was another reason for the small number of survey participants.

Apart from sampling issues, there are limitations regarding the attributes that were studied. Some generally important attributes of online purchasers and non-online purchasers such as experience, motivations, attitudes and benefits, were not included in this study. The first reason for the very limited number of the studied attributes is the inconvenience of long and tiring questionnaires that hotel guests are unwilling to fill out with reliable answers or at all. The second reason for this particular selection of factors was to focus the study on the important issues that are found to be missing in the current body of research based on our literature review. Small number of constructs and limited data from respondents was also the reason for applying only simple descriptive statistics although in further research advanced modeling techniques (like regression and structural equation modeling) should be considered to explain the causal relationships between the studied dimensions and factors.

This paper showed how the development of the Internet has significantly changed the market conditions of tourist organizations providing new tools for tourist marketing and management. It allows interaction between tourist organizations and users and as a result changes the entire process of development, management and marketing in tourism. By reviewing literature, one can notice that research in the field of eTourism still has many unanswered questions and that numerous questions are yet to be raised.

As up to date, eTourism will continue to be oriented towards the consumers and the technology that surrounds them, providing dynamic communication with tourist organizations. Consumers have become very powerful and more able to determine the elements of tourist products. Also, they have become more sophisticated and experienced, and thus have become harder to satisfy. Innovations in technology will help in interaction, personalization and networking therefore it is necessary to design strategies that will take advantage of the opportunities ICT has to offer and turn them in favor of tourist organizations.

There are many opportunities for further research in this field, because the complex nature of human behavior, the constant changes in the environment and the various e-technologies create many chances to tourist companies for innovative activities and use of new and still unrecognized opportunities. Given the mass of participants in tourist transactions, it is relatively easy and possible to collect a large number of data with the help of

current technology. Even repeated studies can be meaningful, because of the rapid changes in modern economy can induce new results.

Technology offers many possibilities about which a lot has been written in this paper, but technology itself can not provide answers to all questions if they are not asked. As the potential customers today are exposed to a (too) large number of options thanks to fast growing access to information, so are the service providers sometimes lost in the possibilities of the technology that extend the budget to various sides. Although they all care to monitor the profitability of investments in each information channel, profit maximization is still missing in the numerous examples, and corrective measures are taken too late. It is evident that it is crucial to understand your customers, as well as to act in accordance with that knowledge. Knowing the cause and the consequence is, in simple terms, what should be achieved. In this direction many issues can and should be raised that question the relationship of the customers, their characteristics, the way they 'came' to the hotel (information search, booking and paying for accommodation) as well as various factors that led to their decision.

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