Olimpia Ban / Adela-Laura Popa

Investigating digital divide in travel distribution: The use of Internet and new media technologies in travel agencies of Bihor, Romania

Abstract

Nowadays, traditional travel agencies face a number of threats, as a result of the development of the virtual distribution market, by multiplying virtual intermediaries and the direct connection of the suppliers to the customers. Minghetti and Buhalis (2010) argue that the technological gap, skills in using information and communication technologies, attitude towards innovation create a digital divide and an exclusion of the organizations that are unable to attend the entire distribution network. Among the strategies that the agencies can adopt to stay on the market are: more attention to the Internet, the personalization of the relationship with customers, brand creation, cost reduction etc. The study conducted aims to determine the way in which travel agencies in Bihor County approach the online market of tourist distribution and what measures they adopt to maintain and develop their market position, relative to competitors. The research is quantitative combined with qualitative research. The results revealed a poor online presence of Bihor travel agencies, the latter not capitalizing the tools that the Internet provides. In relation to their competitors, the travel agencies prove that they understand the need to be customer oriented, toward the relationship with the latter yet without really using the electronic virtual channels for interaction.

Key words: distribution; tourism; Internet; travel agencies; digital media; Romania

Introduction

Significant changes in Internet applications occurred with the arrival of Web 2.0. According to eMarketer (2007) nearly half of the European Internet users make decisions about their holidays using Travel 2.0 applications. In the field of distribution channels in tourism, most changes occurred with the proliferation of information and communication technologies, the Internet and UGC (User Generated Content) (Chiappa, 2013). These changes have provided advantages both for travel agencies as well as for the direct suppliers based on their ability to capitalize them. The use of IT by the travel agencies in the past 40 years played the most important role in reducing the transaction costs between the direct service suppliers and the distributors and the transfer of responsibility for services from the direct suppliers to the distributors (Raymond & Bergeron, 1997).

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Computer technology and the Internet have also increased productivity and efficiency of the hotels' marketing efforts, enabling the hotels to go directly to their consumers for promotion and sales (Law & Lau, 2005), thus diminishing the role of traditional travel agencies. Both in 1998 (Buhalis) and 2009 (Law) there was a big debate on pros and cons of disintermediation in tourism distribution. There is also much debate both in the industry and the academic world regarding the way in which the disintermediation is influenced by IT (Ruiz-Molina, Gil-Saura & Moliner-Velázquez, 2010).

Arguments for disintermediation (Buhalis, 1998) are: a lot of flexibility and a wide variety of choices that can be made on the Internet, the low level of training of travel agents, the lack of objectivity of travel agencies and the favoring of certain suppliers. Arguments against disintermediation are: time savings when using the services of a travel agency, the reduction of the uncertainty following the takeover by the travel agency of arrangement accountability, and increased confidence as a result of human contact. The debate on disintermediation is carried out both in relation to sources of information the hotels provide to customers through the intermediaries they are working with, as well as on the commissions the hotels pay to the intermedieries for every booking they make.

The Internet also creates confusion due to the huge amount of information leading to comparisons focused in particular on price, which reduces consumer loyalty. The Internet remains the most important source of information and Morrison, Jing, O'Leary and Cai (2001) divide the Internet surfers as between searchers (lookers) and buyers (bookers), which are those just seeking information and those who make reservations. Grønflaten (in Chiappa, 2013) found that younger groups prefer less traditional travel agencies when seeking information or planning their holidays and the groups over 59 years prefer face to face interaction. The decision to purchase on the Internet is related to: age of Internet use as a source of information, the type of products concerned (with higher or lower risk, with greater or lesser involvement), the time of the journey concerned, the tourist's age, the type of traveler (occasional, frequent, moderate). Thus, it appears that despite the large number of websites that allow direct booking, travel agencies continue to play an important role in the distribution of hotel products.

For the travel agencies to remain competitive and to develop business in today's dynamic and changing business environment, they must compete with their main competitors, online travel agencies (OTAs). The battle is fought at the level of distribution channels for offering the best prices and the most convenient and fast booking and payment forms. The global distribution systems (GDSs) are still a focal point in the facilitation of the transfer of tourism services due to their global operation. Thus, traditional travel agencies should collaborate with GDSs in order to make their offers more quickly and easily to access. Travelport was the first GDS that allowed travel agencies to make reservations and payments for hotel rooms and car rentals through a graphical user interface (Travelport, 2011). In the study carried out by Travelport, the travel agents openly expressed their concern that they would lose their jobs and that technology would overcome them.

An analysis of the use of the online environment by American consumers from 2010-2013, stressed, in particular, the orientation towards the websites of online agencies (58%) and towards the sites of aggregators (28%), while the websites of traditional agencies are used in small proportion (6%) and have been declining in recent years (Table 1).

Table 1
Reservations of American consumers according to the website type

Online reservations according to the website type	2010	2011	2012	2013
Online travel agencies (Expedia, Travelocity, Orbitz etc.)	66%	62%	60%	58%
Direct service suppliers	48%	46%	45%	45%
Aggregators (Kayak, Dealbase)	15%	14	18%	28%
Websites of traditional travel agencies	8%	9%	7%	6%
Group buying websites	NA	5%	7%	6%
American Express' journey online services	5%	6%	6%	5%
Private travel websites	NA	5%	4%	4%
Others	7%	7%	13%	15%

Source: MMGY/Global Skift: 2013,
http://skift.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/Skift-2014-State-of-Travel-Report-Full.pdf.

Table 2
**Methods used by Europeans for reservations,
in 2013 compared to 2003**

Reservation methods	2003	2013
Internet	13%	76%
Tourism agents	65%	18%
Telephone	22%	5%

Source: Oliveira & Panyik (2015).

In our study we will try to find out if the travel agencies in Bihor county, Romania, are aware of the immense potential the Internet can offer for their activity. In particular, we intend to determine the way in which the travel agencies in Bihor County approach the online market of tourist distribution and what measures they adopt to maintain and develop their market position, relative to competitors. In order to achieve the purpose of this research, two types of research were conducted, a descriptive one and an exploratory one. On the one hand we have analyzed the current situation and, on the other hand, we tried to identify future trends regarding the way that travel agencies in Bihor county are using the Internet and new media technology to develop their market strategy.

The digital challenge in tourism – opportunities and treats

Minghetti and Buhalis (2010) propose a theoretical framework to explain the relevant factors that have led and maintain unequal access and the unequal use of information and communication technology in the tourism industry. Information and communications technologies have revolutionized the structure and organization of tourism and the Internet has dramatically improved the accessibility and overall tourist offer to the personal and commercial sources of information, too. In relation to tourism intermediaries, the Internet enables end users to build direct relations between consumers and suppliers and to circumvent the online and offline intermediaries. On the other hand, the diffusion of information and communications technology is a fantastic opportunity for expansion through the penetration of geographically isolated or poorly represented markets at the level of large tour operators. Information is the 'lifeblood of tourism' (Buhalis, 2003) and the proliferation of the Internet has changed the whole chain of value creation in tourism, marketing, distribution and consumption (Buhalis, 1998).

Minghetti and Buhalis (2010) highlight the disparities in tourist production and consumption, caused by the technological tools available and the ability to use these instruments. This makes the same tour package to have a higher price (sometimes with 100 euro per night) from a distributor compared to another, and therefore a client to pay a lot more for the same package. Discrepancies create the dissatisfaction, frustration and revolt of the customers translated into the abandonment of the traditional travel agent. A simple test allows a quick comparison of prices for the same package at an offline travel agency and some online travel agencies, and the result is amazing in terms of the price difference. The technological disparities create a digital divide and the exclusion of individuals, organizations and communities who are unable to attend the entire distribution network. The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (2001, p. 4) defined the digital divide as: ,the gap between individuals, households, business and geographic areas at different socio-economic levels with regards both to their opportunities to acces ICTs to their use of the Internet for a wide variety of activities'.

Minghetti and Buhalis define the digital divide from another perspective, stating that: ,A digital gap also exists within a destination, since public organizations versus private operators and big enterprises versus SMEs can have different material access, different propensity to innovation as well as different skills and engagement with ICTs' (2010, p. 275). A number of relevant factors are acting on the market that determines unequal access to the use of information technology (Minghetti & Buhalis, 2010). The first factor is the different levels of economic development of countries. These factors affect the ability of markets and destinations to meet and interact globally.

Until recently, the transfer of tourism services from the producers and retail intermediaries (airline companies, hotel rooms, consolidators, TO, tours) were made through computerized reservation systems at retail travel agents and then sold to consumers. The travel agents got their commission from these transactions. This is no longer valid given that bookings are made directly to service providers through graphical user interfaces of computerized booking systems, posted on the provider's website. By avoiding the intermediaries, the direct providers experience the elimination of cost control and customer loyalty, distribution streamlining through images and videos posted by clients (Bennett & Lai, 2005). Avoiding travel agencies is an objective of direct suppliers if they manage to distribute their own products at controlled prices. This is the first threat that travel agencies feel.

Another threat to traditional travel agencies refers to the online travel agencies that operate exclusively online. They offer the end users a comprehensive range, significant discounts, dynamic packages and the convenience of reservation. They almost have no competition. In addition, Yacouel and Fleischer (2012, p. 221) have promoted the idea that the online travel agencies compared to offline travel agencies can cause an increase in quality hotel services and premium prices for these services. To survive, several traditional travel agencies have developed online strategies (Barnett & Standing, 2001).

The third threat to traditional travel agencies is the definite trend towards dynamic packages recorded among travel consumers. In 2008, of the total European tourism markets, dynamic packages had a share of 33% while traditional ones occupied 40% (ITIC, 2010). In addition, the market is flooded with new distributors who rely on price advantages. If in 1998, O'Brien said that, given the threats faced by traditional travel agencies, they would have to radically change their business if they want to survive, in 2014 we can see that this prediction has been fulfilled.

The form in which a business is present on the Internet is very important for its success. Burn and Barnett (1999) suggested six models of a virtual organization: virtual front, coalitions, star alliances, value alliances, market alliances, virtual brokers, and virtual spaces. The obvious danger was disintermediation, which entails the removal of intermediaries, therefore of the travel agencies. 'Disintermediation has been defined as the elimination of intermediaries within the distribution channel, propelled by electronic means that enable consumers to access and transact directly with suppliers and destinations' (Bennett & Buhalis, 2003 in Bennet & Lai, 2005). However, market development has led towards re-intermediation. There is the question of re-intermediation, as 'the internet is also being viewed as a catalyst and an opportunity to re-engineer the travel agents' role in the chain of distribution' (Bennett & Lai, 2005, p. 11).

O'Connor says that the Internet has not changed the main role of intermediaries and that the strength of travel agents is, still, in their ability to organize and interpret large amounts of information to the benefit of their clients (Bennett & Lai, 2005). In addition, travel agents have the ability to save their customers' time and reduce the uncertainty associated to online purchasing (Buhalis, 1998). Bennett and Lai (2005) have found other strategies that agencies can adopt to remain on the market and to develop their business, which are:

- "building a trusted brand to increase customer loyalty;
- reducing operating costs to increase productivity;
- improving the quality of services and staff to provide better professional consulting services;
- identifying and satisfying market niches;
- paying similar attention to the Internet and traditional distribution channels;
- carefully selecting partners to increase the security and stability of the business".

Other strategies are:

- developing vertical integration and strategic alliances to increase market share (Ku, Yang & Huang, 2013);
- emphasis on guaranteeing the security of transactions and services (Cheyne, Downes & Legg, 2005);
- human resource training policies (Millana & Esteban, 2004, p. 544).

Methodology of research

The aim of this study is to determine how the offline travel agencies (physical) address the virtual market of travel distribution and what measures they adopt to maintain and develop their market position, in relation to their direct competitors, the aggressive online travel agencies.

The goals derived are:

- assessing the degree of capitalization of online presence in the distribution of tourism services (website functions, connecting to the new social media, booking engine etc.);
- identifying ways in which travel agencies respond or plan to do so to the competition made by the online agencies;
- The target population of the research is consisted of the travel agencies in Bihor County, Romania. Bihor County is one of the 41 counties in Romania and has (the year of study, 2014) 69 travel agencies,

representing 2.46% of all travel agencies in Romania (2800 in 2012 according to the ECTAA http://www.ectaa.org/files/cms/cr14-003-448.pdf).

According to the National Tourism Authority (http://turism.gov.ro/informatii-publice/, accessed on 14 December 2014) in Bihor county there are 69 approved travel agencies, of which 89.85% are based in Oradea, the county city seat. The main function of the travel agencies included in the research is to sell travel products and services. According to Romanian legislation, a key criterion to delimitate the categories of travel agencies is to divide them into tour operator agencies and retail agencies. As presented in the Table no. 3, in Bihor county, 82.6% are identified as TO agencies, 13.04% are retail agencies, and 4.35% are touroperatours and retail agencies. It is also important to mention that all the 69 agencies are mainly focused on leisure/vacation travel services and only about 10-15% also provide corporate/business travel services.

The number of travel agencies in Bihor witnessed slight fluctuations yet with an upward trend, from 39 units in 2004 to 69th in 2014 (Department of Statistics Bihor). This upward trend follows the national trend in the number of travel agencies for 2005-2010, with a slight decrease after 2010 (Eurostat online data code: sbs_sc_1b_se_r2, http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/statistics_explained/index.php/Travel_agency_and_tour_operator_statistics_-_NACE_Rev._2, consultat în decembrie 2014). Between 2012-2014, 8 agencies of Oradea have requested the deletion of the tourism license or cease of activity.

Table 3
Profile of population under consideration

	Total agencies under consideration		Interviewed agencies	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
Total	69	100.00%	19	27.53%
TO agencies	57	82.61%	15	78.94%
Retail agencies	9	13.04%	2	10.53%
Agencies and touroperatours and retail agencies	3	4.35%	2	10.53%
Established between 1992-2002	17	24.64%	4	21.05%
Established between 2003-2007	18	26.09%	8	42.11%
Established between 2008-2014	34	49.28%	7	36.84%
With a net turnover of up to 15,000 Euro	18	26.09%	3	15.79%
With a net turnover between 15,000-50,000 Euro	20	28.99%	7	36.84%
With a net turnover between 50,000-500,000 Euro	14	20.29%	4	21.05%
With a net turnover over 500,000 Euro	10	14.49%	5	26.32%
Unspecified turnover	7	10.14%	0	0.00%
Number of employees between 1-10	52	75.36%	15	78.95%
Number of employees at the network level between 11-250	9	13.04%	3	15.79%
With a number of employees over 250	1	1.45%	1	5.26%
Unspecified number of employees	7	10.14%	0	0.00%

Research hypotheses

Based on the information presented above we consider the following hypotheses as important to achieve the objectives of the study:

H1 The travel agencies in Bihor do not fully exploit the advantages provided by the virtual environment provided by the Internet (the existence of a functional website, its maintenance and the functions of the website, booking search engines, newsletters, own blog, online customer support, Google Analytics, SEO, connection to at least one global distribution system, entering into new socialization environments provided by the Internet).

H 2 There is a direct link between the type of agency (tour operators or retailers) and:
- the quality of the content of the website - manifestation in the virtual environment (search and booking engine, newsletters, own blog, customer support, SEO, Google Analytics etc.),
- the level of interactivity of the website - the interaction with customers,
- the entering into new socialization environments provided by the Internet.

H 3 There is a direct link between the experience in the field and:
- the quality of the content of the website - manifestation in the virtual environment (search and booking engine, newsletters, own blog, customer support, SEO, Google Analytics etc.),
- the level of interactivity of the website - the interaction with customers,
- the entering into new socialization environments provided by the Internet.

H4 There is a direct link between the turnover and:
- the quality of the content of the website - manifestation in the virtual environment (search and booking engine, newsletters, own blog, customer support, SEO, Google Analytics etc.),
- the level of interactivity of the website - the interaction with customers,
- the entering into new socialization environments provided by the Internet.

H5 The offline travel agencies in Bihor do not understand the importance of online presence and the quality of online presence, to counteract the expansion of online travel agencies.

H6 The travel agencies in Bihor do not make a clear distinction between their competitors: the offline travel agencies and the online travel agencies and do not adopt specific differentiation measures.

Given the complexity of the objectives, the research was conducted in two stages, during the period November 2014-February 2015. In order to achieve the aim of the study we used two types of research: a descriptive one and an exploratory one. The descriptive research involves the analysis of all 69 travel agencies regarding the concerned issues. The exploratory research was based on interviews, of which the sample included 19 agencies from a total of 69. In the first stage all the agencies in Bihor were inventoried. An overview of all the 69 agencies in operation in the year 2014 was performed, considering the following aspects: the type of agency (tour operators or retailer), year of establishment, possession of a website, the agency's turnover in the last year, the website's functions, the level of interactivity of the website (the interaction with customers), the presence on Facebook and other social media, etc.

The websites were analyzed in order to identify the functions that travel agencies have assigned to them:
- to present the offer grouped by category of service and / or packages (updated, dynamic);
- the existence of interfaces for communication with customers / engine that should allow and / or book and / or pay and how this engine works;

- to offer customer online counseling;
- to record the opinions of consumers;
- to host the newsletters with useful information for tourists.

The analysis of the online presence of travel agencies covered by this study was conducted in view of several components: the websites of travel agencies and the content elements they include, aspects related to interactivity in the online environment (email marketing, social media marketing, the existence of a search engine etc.) and elements ranging from search engine marketing (SEO - Search Engine Optimization and PPC - Pay Per Click). The research methodology used to conduct this part of the study included content analysis of the official web pages of the agencies, and an observation guide has been developed in this view. Content analysis is a method of observation considered to be particularly suitable when the phenomenon to be observed aims at communication such as analyzing the content of certain advertising messages, the content of articles published in newspapers, the websites of some categories of companies etc. (Popa, 2013, p. 71).

In the second phase there was an exploration of qualitative data in the form of interviews among a representative sample of travel agencies in Oradea. Those interviewed were people with decision-making power from 19 agencies, namely 27.53% of the total. The instrument used was a semi-structured questionnaire with four sections: information about the respondent, the evaluation of the activity of the agency in the present, connections to the new distribution channels and the strengths and weaknesses of the agency in relation to their competitors. The research methods and tools used in the first phase were: a survey through questionnaire applied to the entire population under consideration, content analysis of the websites using the observation guide. The data was processed with the SPSS program to highlight the correlations, Pearson coefficient, contingency tables (crosstabulation) and calculation of χ^2.

The research methods and tools used in the second stage were: a survey through interview of over 27.53% of the population studied. The analysis of data from interviews was performed using the text analysis software TROPES V8.44 English Version, developed by Pierre Molette and Agnès Landré on the basis of the work of Rodolphe Ghiglione and ATLAS.ti 7.5.

Results

H1 The Bihor travel agencies do not fully exploit the advantages of the virtual environment provided by the Internet (the existence of a functional website, its maintenance and the functions of the website, booking and search engine, newsletters, own blog, online customer support, Google Analytics, SEO, connection to at least one global distribution system, entering into new social environments provided by the Internet).

Answer H1 The analysis of the functions of all Bihor agencies' websites produced the following results:
- regarding the way that the travel agencies present their offer grouped by category of service and / or packages - all 81.15% of a travel agencies that have a functional site present their offer within it;
- regarding the existence of an interface for communication with customers / search engine which should allow and/or book and/or pay and the way in which this engine works - only 53.62% of

agencies have a search engine and booking interface for customers, and only 43.47% of the agencies have no restrictions regarding reservations (examples of restrictions: reservations can be made only two months before the departure date or they send the booking confirmation via emails). It allows searching, booking and direct payment in all cases (53.62%);

• regarding the sending of newsletters with useful information for tourists - only 46.37% of the agencies provide information in the form of newsletters, while 72.46% of the agencies require the visitor's address;
• regarding the existence of a blog - only 14.49% have their own blog;
• regarding online counseling - only 20.28% provide this service;
• regarding the hosting of comments, only 1.44% offer the possibility of recording opinions of their visitors.

Content elements of the functional websites at the moment of the study:

• the vast majority (87.5%) is limited to provide general information about travel. Of these, however, over 60% enables subscribing to their newsletter to get this information. It can be noted that only 9% of the agencies present detailed information about trips on their websites;
• more than 77% of the websites of the agencies present both data on the agency and data showing the offer of the agency. It can be noted, however, that 18% present the offer of the agency, but no data about the agency.

Figure 1
The situation of the agencies' websites and their functions
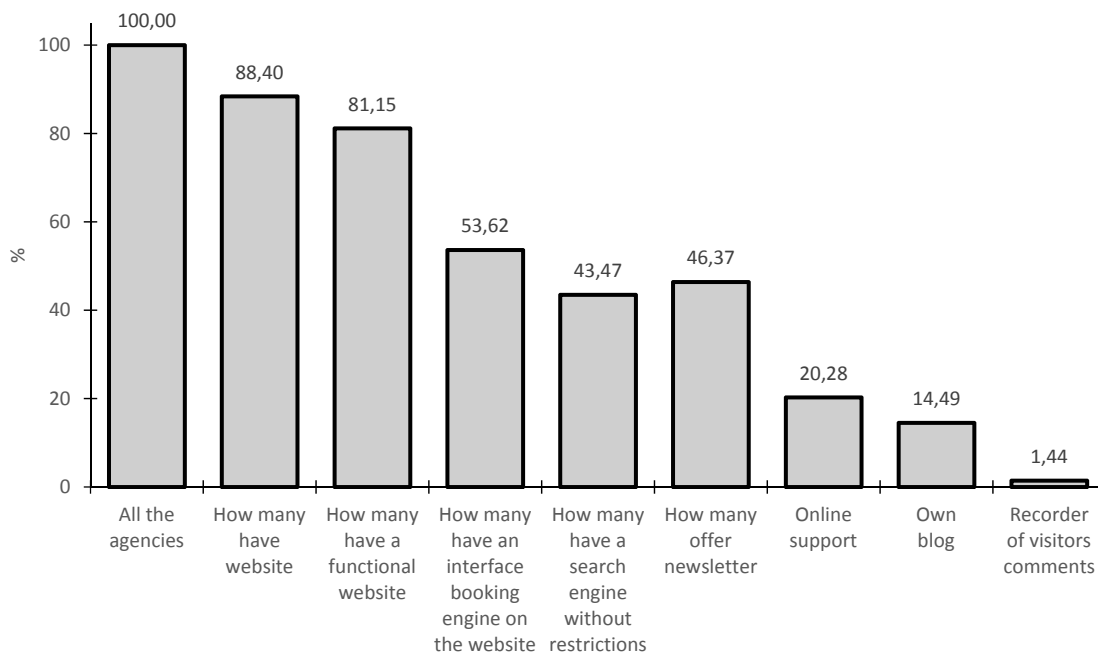
Aspects targeting interactivity in the online environment:

• 55% of agencies ask for the clients' e-mails, while only on 34.5% of the websites was there the presence of a search engine that allows searching and making reservations according to more options

(40% of the websites had no search engines). Based on these results we can conclude that the interest of travel agencies in creating and developing relationships with customers or potential customers is low, at least through the potential offered by the online marketing tools;

• 8.93% do not use social media to make their presence known in the online environment, namely to communicate with customers or potential customers, and 62.5% use only Facebook. 14.29% use two social networks, one of which is Facebook. In addition to Facebook, the most used social network is Twitter (7.14%), followed by Google+ and LinkedIn. 12.5% use three social networks, one of which is Facebook.

The relationship with social networks has developed by posting information about the offer on Facebook (73.91%), Twitter (17.39%), Google+ (10.14%) and LinkedIn (2.89%). 63.15% of the agencies surveyed (19) say that they use paid online promotion, and 84% of them claim to be concerned with optimizing the website for the search engines (search engine optimization).

Based on these results, the hypothesis *H1: Bihor travel agencies do not fully exploit the advantages of the virtual environment provided by the Internet,* is proved to be valid.

To verify the following 3 hypothesis, based on data collected a set of nominal variables was generated in order to describe the quality of online presence: the quality of website content, the penetration into new socializing environments provided by the Internet, and the level of interactivity of the website - interaction with customers. Next, we sought to identify some association relations between variables such as the type of agency, the experience in the field, the turnover, and the aforementioned variables that describe aspects related to the quality of online presence.

H2 There is a direct link between the type of agency (tour operators or retailers) and:

• the quality of the content of the website - manifestation in the virtual environment (search and booking engine, newsletters, own blog, customer support, SEO, Google Analytics etc.);
• the level of interactivity of the website - the interaction with customers;
• the entering into new socialization environments provided by the Internet.

Answer H2 To evaluate the existence of an association between the type of agency and the three variables presented, we used the contingency tables (crosstabulation) and calculation of χ^2 value. The results showed no link between the type of agency and none of the three variables that describe the quality of online presence. Therefore, we can deduce that the type of agency does not affect the quality of their online presence. The hypothesis H2 is not valid.

H3 There is a direct link between the experience in the field and:

• the quality of the content of the website - manifestation in the virtual environment (search and booking engine, newsletters, own blog, customer support, SEO, Google Analytics etc.);
• the level of interactivity of the website - the interaction with customers;
• the entering into new socialization environments provided by the Internet.

Answer H3 Also, the assessment of the existence of association between experience and the three variables presented was based on the contingency tables (crosstabulation) and calculation of χ^2 value. The results showed that there is no link between the experience in the field and the three variables that

describe the quality of online presence. Accordingly, we conclude that the experience of the agency does not affect the quality of their online presence. The hypothesis H3 is not valid.

H4 There is a direct link between the turnover and:

• the quality of the content of the website - manifestation in the virtual environment (search and booking engine, newsletters, own blog, customer support, SEO, Google Analytics etc.)
• the level of interactivity of the website - the interaction with customers,
• the entering into new socialization environments provided by the Internet.

Answer H4 The evaluation of the association between the turnover and the three variables describing the quality of online presence was also based on the contingency tables (crosstabulation) (the turnover was converted into a nominal variable) and the calculation of χ^2 value. In this case was found the existence of an association between the turnover and each of the three variables. Thus, when associating the turnover with the quality of the website content, the value of χ^2 calculated is 13.115, higher than 0 (aspect indicating that, at the sample level, there is an association between the two variables analyzed) and the Asymp. Sig value corresponding to the probability of the acceptance of the null hypothesis is less than 0.05. This allows us to reject the null hypothesis (that there is no association between the two variables) and to generally accept the alternative hypothesis with a probability of 95%. To measure the intensity of that association, given that the contingency table is of 3x3 type, we turned to the calculation of Cramer's V coefficient. The value of the coefficient is 0.345, which indicates that the intensity of the relationship between the two variables is moderate (the coefficient can have values between 0 and 1).

In the case of association between the turnover and the penetration into new socialization environments provided by the Internet, the value of χ^2 calculated is 20.042, while the Asymp. Sig value corresponding to the probability of accepting the null hypothesis is less than 0.01. This allows us to reject the null hypothesis (that there is no association between the two variables) and to accept the alternative hypothesis with a probability of 99%. The intensity of the relationship between the two variables is moderate (Cramer's V equal to 0.427).

In the case of association between the turnover and the level of interactivity of the website - the interaction with customers, the value of χ^2 calculated is 11.933, and the Asymp. Sig value corresponding to the probability of the acceptance of the null hypothesis is less than 0.05. This allows us to reject the null hypothesis (that there is no association between the two variables) and to accept the alternative hypothesis with a probability of 95%. The intensity of the relationship between the two variables is also moderate (Cramer's V equal to 0.329).

Even if the intensity of the association is moderate, it may be inferred, however, that there is an association between the turnover and the quality of online presence of travel agencies in the sense that, the higher the turnover the better the quality of online presence. But we cannot conclude that the agencies with higher turnover are more aware of the importance of online presence and of the potential offered by the Internet and online marketing tools. For such a conclusion a new research has to be carried out. The hypothesis H4 is valid.

H5 The offline travel agencies in Bihor do not understand the importance of online presence and the quality of online presence, to counteract the expansion of online travel agencies.

Answer H5 The validation of this hypothesis was made using the data obtained from the exploratory research based on 19 interviews of people with decision-making power from 19 agencies, namely 27.53% of the total. Of the agencies surveyed in this exploratory research, 100% have functional website created when the agency was set up or in the first years of operation (4-10 years).

When investigating the reason for website set up, although 94.73% have agreed that the website is important in facilitating interaction with customers, yet:

• 57.89% mentioned as the purpose the transferring of a part of activity in the online environment;

• 5.26% were motivated to create a website due to copying others;

• only 15.78% said that the "client" is the purpose of the website, either referring to communication, promotion or the maintaining of the relation with it.

Figure 2
Reasons mentioned to set up websites
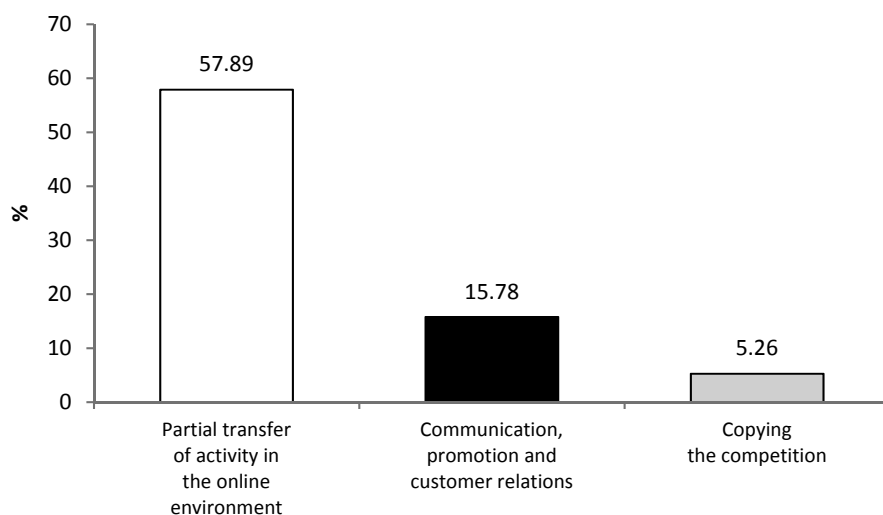
In researching how the website is updated and maintained, it was found that:

• it is the task of the employees of the company for 89.47%, of which only 42.1% are IT specialists;

• only 10.52% of the travel agencies have turned to a specialized company for maintenance of the website;

The frequency of website updates: daily 52.63%, weekly 21.05%, monthly 10.52%, and annually or twice a year 15.78%.

Of those surveyed, 63.15% use the Google Analytics service to monitor website activity and 84.21% have optimized the website to get a good position in the search engines (SEO). It provides a constant monitoring of the competitors' web pages only in proportion of 42.1%, 5.26% even say that this is against the policy of the agency.

Among the agencies interviewed, all are connected to at least one global distribution system (GDS) (100%) and the majority (78.94%) are connected to Worldspan, followed by Amadeus (36.84%) and Sabre (10.52%) or other systems (3.15%).

Regarding the way in which the representatives of the agencies perceive the online environment, there is the tendency to consider that the sales in the online environment will increase (Figure 3).
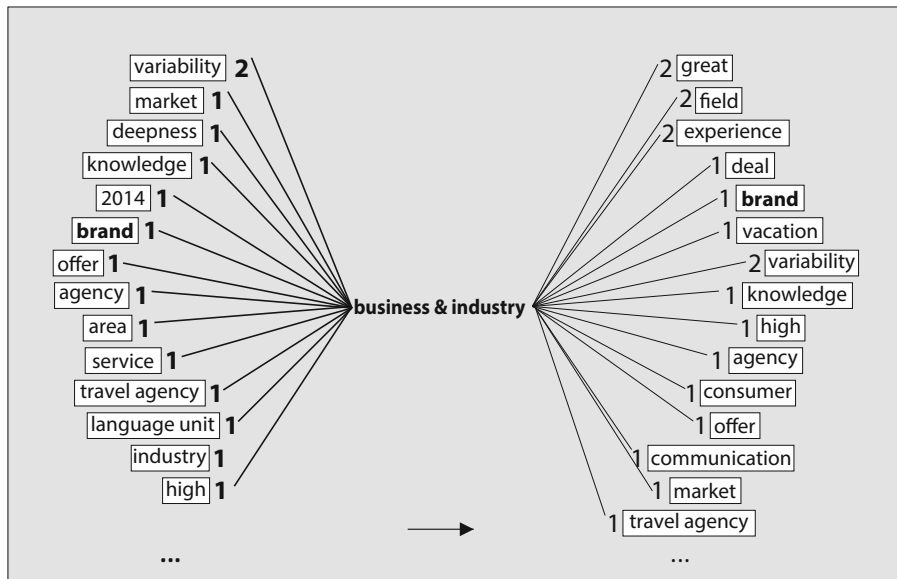
Figure 3
Forecasts of the online environment impact
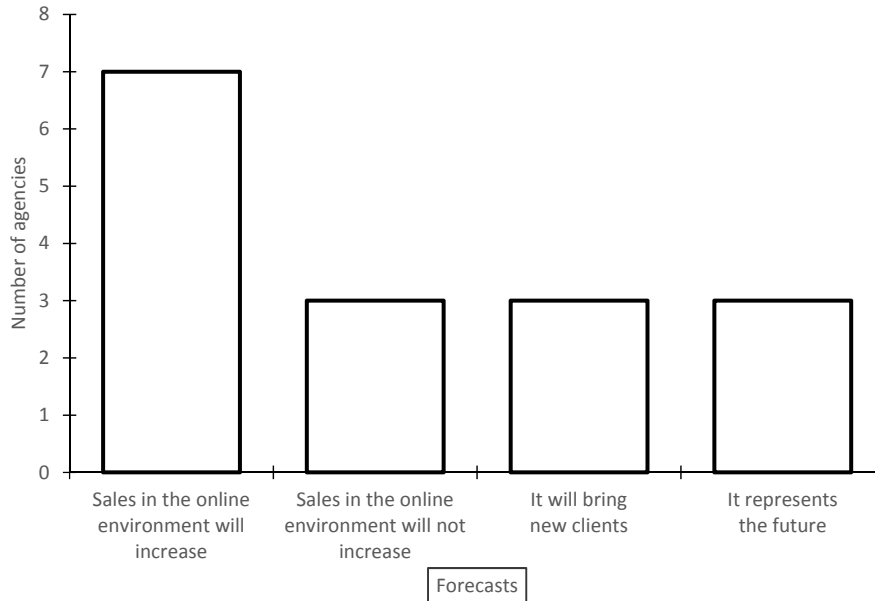
H6 The travel agencies in Bihor county do not make a clear distinction between their competitors (both offline travel agencies and the online travel agencies) and thus do not adopt specific differentiation measures.

Answer H6 The validation of this hypothesis was also made using the data obtained from the exploratory research based on 19 interviews of people with decision-making power from 19 agencies, namely 27.53% of the total. We used the content analysis of the interviews in this case. When investigating the perception of the representatives of the agencies interviewed regarding the advantage they have over offline and online competitors, we can notice a difference. In relation to offline travel agencies, the advantages mentioned focused on 'business and industry' (field developing, variety of offer and its custom and experience in the field) (Figure 4) and also on the 'properties and characteristics of the agency' (the offer and its custom and quality of staff) (Figure 5).

Figure 4
**Advantages in relation with the competition, according to
those interviwed (from the business and industry perspective)**

The star graph displays the relations between references, or between a word category and a reference. The figures shown on the graph give the number of relations (co-occurrence frequency) existing between the various references. These graphs show the relations between the references. They are oriented: the references on the left of the central reference are its predecessors, those on the right its successors.

Figure 5
**Advantages in relation to competition, according to
those interviwed (the features and characateristics of the agency)**

Figure 6
**The main terms defining the advantages mentioned by the agencies interviewed,
in relation to the agencies exclusively operating online**

Figure 6 shows the relations between the references made in responses - each reference appears as a sphere whose surface is proportional to the number of words it contains. The distance between the central class and the other classes is proportional to the number of relations connecting them: in other words, when two classes are close together, they share many relations, and when they are far from one another, they share few relations.

In relation to online travel agencies, the advantages mentioned emphasized the focus on the customer and the relationship with the customer. The text analysis reveals the important advantage, mentioning among the advantages of operating in the physical environment in comparison with their online competitors, the close relationship with the customer (Figure 6 and Figure 7).

Figure 7
**Emphasis on the relations between the terms used in presenting
the advantages of offline travel agencies in relation to third-party websites**

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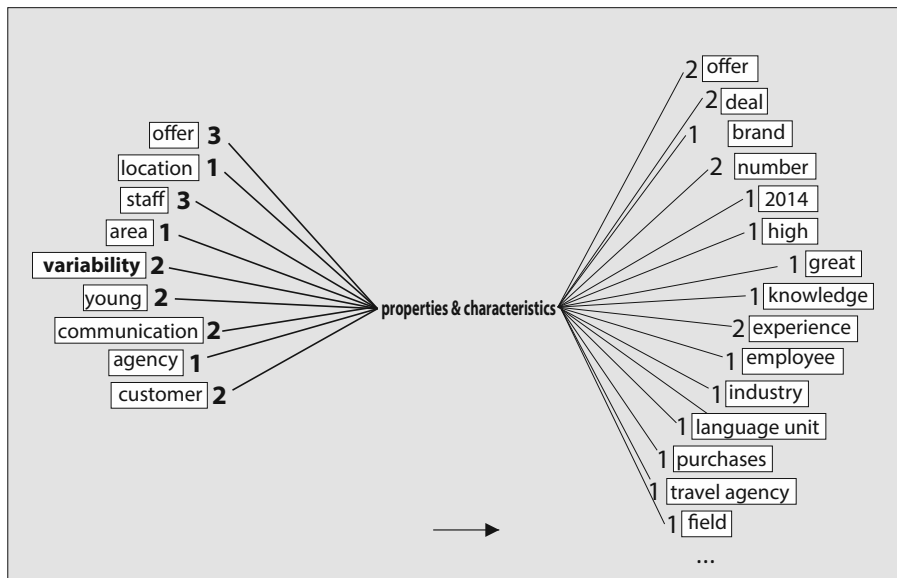Olimpia Ban / Adela-Laura Popa
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Figure 7 displays the relations between references, or between a word category and a reference. The figures shown on the graph give the number of relations (co-occurrence frequency) existing between the various references. These graphs show the relations between the references. They are oriented: the references on the left of the central reference are its predecessors, those on the right its successors.

Conclusions and further research

One of the most important conclusions drawn from the study is that the travel agencies in Bihor county do not fully exploit the advantages of online presence and do not use all the tools that the Internet and the Web 2.0 platform bring. The empirical study conducted revealed the following:

• the travel agencies in Bihor have an online extension as a website but only 81.15% have a functional website;

• the analysis of the functions of the website showed that it is used, in particular, to present the offer and the agency (over 77%), but the vast majority (87.5%) is limited to provide general information about travel and 18% present the agency offer but do not present data about the agency;

• the number of agencies hosting newsletters with useful information for tourists is less than 50%, 20% have a blog, and below 2% host customer impressions;

• over 90% of the agents are present on social networks but most only use Facebook and a small percentage use two or more networks;

• although all the agencies interviewed collaborate with at least one global distribution system, only 53.62% of the total agents have a search engine and a booking interface for the customers and only for 43.47% of the agents the reservations have no restrictions;

• online counseling is provided by only 20.28% of the agencies;

It was found that there is not a direct link between the type of agency (tour operators or retailers) or the experience/age of the agency and:

• the quality of its site content – the manifestation in the virtual environment (search and booking engine, newsletters, own blog, customer care, SEO, Google Analytics etc.);

• the level of interactivity of the site - the interaction with customers;

• the entering into new socialization environments provided by the Internet.

The only correlation identified is between the turnover of the travel agency and the quality of its website content, the level of interactivity of the site and the entering into a new socializing environment. Even if the intensity of the association is moderate, it may be inferred, however, that there is an association between the turnover and the quality of online presence of travel agencies in the sense that the higher the turnover, the higher the quality of the online presence. This correlation supports the digital divide hypothesis of Minghetti and Bihalis (2010). It appears that financial resources facilitate the alignment to the e-distribution market by allowing investment into new channels and giving more chances to travel agencies to adapt. On the other hand, the influence may be mutual, such that a better use of the virtual environment leads to an increase in turnover, respectively.

The travel agencies in Bihor believe that they understand the importance of the existence and quality of their online presence in order to counter the expansion of online travel agencies. However, only 15.78% mentioned the 'customer' in the view of website creation, for reasons like communication, promotion, trading or liaising. When investigating the perception of the representatives of the agencies interviewed about the advantage they have over physical and virtual competitors, we can notice a difference. In relation to the physical agencies, the advantages mentioned focused on 'business and industry' (field developing, the variety of supply and its custom and the experience in the field) but also on 'the properties and characteristics of the agency' (offer customization and the qualities of the staff). In relation to the virtual agencies, the advantages mentioned emphasized the focus on attention and developing a relationship with the customer. The text analysis reveals this important advantage, mentioning among the advantages of operating in the physical environment in comparison with their online competitors, the creation of a close relationship with the customer.

The limit of the research is the reduced population studied (69), although, by the number of travel agencies, Bihor County is in the top 10 counties nationwide. The results cannot be extrapolated, but it is believed that the results can be reflected at the national level. Further research in Romania will aim at exploring strategies and actions taken up by travel agencies to maintain and strengthen their market position.

Acknowledgements

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