A qualitative analysis of consumer attitudes on adoption of online travel services

Evangelos Christou

SUMMARY

The study reported in this paper explores consumers' experiences with technology-assisted service encounters by investigating the applicability of Mick and Fournier's paradoxes of technology adoption to the online travel agents' services scenario. In-depth interviews were conducted to explore consumers' experiences when using travel agents' online services and the results were compared to those of Mick and Fournier. The findings are similar, suggesting that when consumers adopt online technology they can simultaneously develop positive and negative attitudes. The findings of this study also suggest that the nature of some of the paradoxes experienced by consumers may depend on the industry (travel industry in this study) and the technology (the Internet in this study) being investigated; consumers can develop multiple attitudes towards certain source elements, resulting in existence of contradictory views and attitudes. In terms of Mick and Fournier's paradoxes, the findings of this study indicate that when consumers use technology assisted service encounters for travel agents' services they are most likely to experience control/chaos, freedom/enslavement, competence/incompetence, efficiency/ inefficiency, engaging/disengaging, assimilation/isolation paradoxes and least likely to experience the new/ obsolete paradox.

Key words:

adoption of technological innovations; online travel agents; online travel services; consumer attitudes; Greece

INTRODUCTION

The ways consumers evaluate their service delivery outcomes significantly influence their satisfaction and/ or dissatisfaction with a particular service encounter and their overall views of a firm's service quality (Lehtinen and Lehtinen 1982; Gronroos 1998; Yang and Jun 2002). The existing literature suggests that when evaluating the service delivery process, personal contact is the most significant determinant of customer satisfaction and/or dissatisfaction because customers cannot clearly distinguish the service they receive from the employees who provide it (Schneider and Bowen 1985; Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry 1988). This suggests that a change in the series of actions that reduces human contact would result in a change in how consumers evaluate the service encounter (Gronroos 1984; Zeithaml, Parasuraman and Berry 1990; Gilbert and Powell-Perry 2003).

Evangelos Christou, PhD., University of the Aegean, Department of Business Administration, Chios, Greece
E-mail: e.christou@aegean.gr

Technological advances have resulted in significant changes in how some service organisations deliver their services. In particular, services that were traditionally delivered through personal contact between an organisation's employees and its customers can now often be delivered online through the Internet with minimal direct contact between the two parties. It appears likely that this change in the service delivery process has resulted in a change in the way consumers evaluate their service encounters (Zeithaml 2002). Researchers have begun to explore the impact of online technology on service delivery processes with the general consensus being that more research is necessary for a greater understanding (Dabholkar 1994; Bitner, Brown and Meuter 2000; Christou and Kassianidis 2002).

The aim of the study reported in this paper is to explore consumers' experiences with online technology-assisted service encounters in the travel industry and in par-ticular in the travel agent sector. This industry sector was selected because online technological innovations have significantly changed how travel agents deliver their services, providing consumers with online access to reservations and purchases of a wide variety of travel products (like airline tickets, hotel accommodation, transfer services, etc).

BACKGROUND LITERATURE

Numerous studies have explored how consumers adopt technology (Wilkie 1994; Barczak, Ellen and Pilling 1997; Swanson, Kopecky and Tucker 1997; Wiefels 1997; Aggarwal, Chaj and Wilemon 1998; Dover 1988; Williams and Tao 1998; Otto and Chung 2000; Christou and Kassianidis 2002; Huang and Law 2003). These studies can be classified into four categories based on their overall perspectives. The first category includes studies that address the stages consumers go through from awareness of the new technology's existence to adoption (Aggarwal, Chaj and Wilemon 1998; Williams and Tao 1998; Otto and Chung 2000). The second category involves studies that explore the amount of time that elapses between the inception and the adoption of new technology (Wilkie 1994; Wiefels 1997). The third category consists of theories that focus on the impact of consumers' characteristics and stage in life cycle when adopting technology (Swanson, Kopecky and Tucker 1997; Barczak, Ellen and Pilling 1997; Christou and Kassianidis 2002).

Finally there are theories that address the nature of the technology being adopted (Wiefels 1997; Dover 1988; Frambach, Barkema and Wedel 1998; Huang and Law 2003). All these theories emphasise consumers' behaviours leading to the adoption of new technology.

Mick and Fournier's (1998) theory of technology adoption is the most pertinent to this study as it focuses on consumers' behaviours and attitudes once they have adopted a technology. Mick and Fournier (1998) studied consumers' perceptions of technology and the development of their attitudes once they had adopted a technology. Their data collection was a two-stage process done through in-depth interviews with 29 households. During the first stage they interviewed 16 informants seeking information on their general attitudes towards technology. During the second stage they interviewed 13 informants 24 hours, six to eight weeks and six to eight months after buying and using their new technologies. The authors found that consumers experience eight paradoxes of technology: control/chaos, freedom/enslavement, new/obsolete, competence/incompetence, efficiency/inefficiency, fulfils/creates needs, assimilation/isolation and engaging/disengaging. These paradoxes are briefly discussed below.

The control/chaos paradox was found to be the most prevalent among their informants. The finding was that technology evokes feelings of control when it dictates consumers' activities and feelings of chaos when it interferes with their activities resulting in confusion. Feelings of freedom are experienced when technology provides minimal restrictions and independence (Rowley 2002). By comparison enslavement results when activities are restricted by dependence on technology.

The new/obsolete paradox was found to result from new knowledge and innovations generated by science that constantly supersede previous existing knowledge. This is the case where continuous technological innovations constantly make existing technologies obsolete. Technology also evokes feelings of competence and incompetence. Competence results when consumers understand how a particular technology works and incompetence results when they are ignorant of how to use a particular technology (Yang and Fang 2004).

Technology can be considered efficient when tasks can be completed in less time and with less effort. However, inefficiency may result when the same tasks require more time and effort, such as when the technology does not work like it is expected to (Long and Mellon

2004). Mick and Fournier's (1998) informants stated that technology can fulfil some needs but it can also identify unrealised needs. The fulfils/creates needs paradox appeared to be subtle and was discussed in relation to the ownership and use of computers. For instance, some informants indicated that the computers they own fulfil various needs whilst others felt the need to own computers and/or acquire the knowledge to utilise them.

Technology can also result in human separation and/or human togetherness (Fjermestad and Romano 2003). It facilitates assimilation when consumers engage in activities such as watching sports and movies on television and communicating through the use of telephones and computers. By comparison, isolation results when the time consumers spend watching television and playing video games erodes the time they spend socialising. Mick and Fournier (1998) also found that the use of technology could be engaging and/or disengaging. It is engaging when it facilitates the flow of activities and disengaging when it leads to disruption and passivity (Mick and Fournier 1998:126).

Mick and Fournier's (1998) study addressed the use of technologies such as computers, answering machines, caller identification kits and video cameras. These are products that consumers typically purchase and own for leisure-related outcomes. This study investigates the generalizability of Mick and Fournier's (1998) eight paradoxes to the travel agents industry. The emphasis is thus on forms of online technology that are often not owned by the consumer and that are used to facilitate commercial transactions (for buying travel products and services) rather than leisure pastimes (Legoherel, Fischer-Lokou and Gueguen 2000).

With the introduction of electronic travel services on the Internet, travel agents are able to anticipate changes in consumers' shopping behaviour and examine socio-demographic profiles of consumers (Go, Van Rekom and Teunissen 1999; Bedard 2000). For instance, the mounting average age of consumers will increase the need for more convenience in travel shopping. E-commerce in travel services provides this convenience by enabling consumers to make reservations and order tickets from home, and either having the tickets or vouchers subsequently delivered to the home or receiving an electronic confirmation of the reservation. Furthermore, the number of consumers experiencing time pressure is growing for many reasons; electronic

travel shopping service provides consumers with the opportunity to save time by making visits to a traditional travel agent redundant (Marcusen 2001).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A sample of 30 informants was selected from the population of Northern Greece who currently use travel agents' online services via a snowballing technique. Researchers recommend the use of snowballing when sampling frames and information on the target populations are unavailable (Minichiello, Aroni, Timewell and Alexander 1995; Sarantakos 1998), as was the case in this study. The snowballing process began by asking colleagues to introduce the researcher to consumers who use travel agents' websites. These informants were in turn asked to introduce the researcher to other users of travel agents' online services.

While snowballing provides access to members of the targeted population it increases the risk of non-representative samples because the characteristics of the resulting sample may be different from those of the target population (Strangor 1998; Sarantakos 1998). Thus, although the resulting sample provided valuable insights into consumers' experiences with travel agents' online services, it is not representative of the targeted population and its small size means that the results are not generalizable. Instead, the objective was to provide initial insights into an area of consumer travel behaviour that has received little attention in the past. The results provide a starting point for future validating research.

Data collection was done through semi-structured in-depth interviews, which are ideal in scenarios such as this where the available secondary data is limited and it is necessary to probe interviewees to gain a thorough understanding of their behaviours and attitudes (Denzin and Lincoln 1994; Fontana and Frey 1994; Minichiello, Aroni, Timewell and Alexander 1995). The interviews were conducted using a funnelling approach so as to establish rapport between the interviewer and the interviewees (Kidder, Judd and Smith 1986; Fontana and Frey 1994; Minichiello, Aroni, Timewell and Alexander 1995). Thus, interviews began with a general discussion of the interviewees' overall attitudes towards travel agents, followed by questions relating specifically to travel agents' online services and informants' experiences when using them.

The in-depth interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed with the resulting data imported into NUDIST (Non-Numerical Unstructured Data Information Searching, Indexing and Theorizing) software. NUDIST was selected as it facilitates analysis by allowing easy identification and classification of themes (Weitzman and Miles 1995). The data were analysed using line-by-line coding in order to identify and note emerging themes and categories regarding the use of travel agents' online services (Strauss and Corbin 1990; Huberman and Miles 1994). Some of the codes were developed deductively on the basis of Mick and Fournier's (1998) paradoxes of technology adoption (Miles and Huberman 1984; Strauss and Corbin 1990) while others were developed inductively based upon the issues raised by interviewees.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Control VS Chaos

Mick and Fournier's (1998) informants indicated that they experience feelings of control when technology seems to direct their affairs and chaos when it seems to disrupt their activities. The interviewees to this study alluded to this paradox. They indicated that using on-line booking technology makes them feel like they are in control because they can conduct many transactions at their convenience, illustrated by the following comment: *The travel agents let you do what you want to do. You can pay, can make reservations, buy an airline ticket, or try and book hotel accommodation (Petros, on control).* However, chaos can result when they cannot initiate or successfully complete a transaction, as Petros stated: *The biggest disdain is when you go there (to a travel agent's website) and it is not working or some of its facilities have been shut down... all of a sudden you have to deal with not being able to complete your transaction and you do not know what to do.*

The interviewees reported feelings of control when there are minimal restrictions and they can conduct any of their travel planning transactions with the use of online technology. Once they are accustomed to conducting their own transactions chaos can result when they expect to use the online technology and it is unavailable. The meaning of control appears to differ between the studies. Mick and Fournier's (1998) informants suggested that technology controls them, directing them and their activities. Their informants

gave an example of a computer that could wake them up and answering machines that needed constant checking (Mick and Fournier 1998). The interviewees to this study indicated that by using online technology they could control their own travel planning activities. Specifically, they can conduct their transactions with the travel agent when, where and how they choose. The significance of control is consistent with existing literature which suggests that the more control consumers feel they have during the service encounter the more positive their attitudes (Bateson 1985; Dabholkar1996; Sigala 2003).

Freedom VS Enslavement

In this study the perception of control was related to that of freedom. The interviewees indicated that online technology gives them freedom to conduct their travel planning transactions whenever and wherever they choose. They can buy airline tickets, book hotel accommodation and perform other transactions at their own convenience. In years gone by consumers could only find travel information and buy travel products and services during office hours when their travel agents' shops were open. Online technology evokes feelings of freedom because it has reduced these restrictions by allowing consumers to perform travel planning transactions at their convenience, illustrated by a comment made by Maria: *You can buy an airline or a train ticket without having to go to the agent, and without having to wait to queues. If you do online reservations you can monitor the status of your request through the Internet whenever you like.*

However, some interviewees indicated that though they do most of their travel transactions electronically there are limits to what they can achieve. In particular, they discussed restrictions imposed on the number of transactions and the nature of transactions they can conduct. This enslavement dimension is put forward by Ioannis: *I mean for simple services it works. But if you have a particular question it is not very good because they have limited services on it.* Likewise, it also could be detected from Marianna's comment: *They say you are allowed 2 airline tickets without commission. That is what I do.*

The perceptions of enslavement appear to differ between the two studies. Mick and Fournier's (1998) informants indicated that technology results in feelings of

enslavement when they become dependent on it, indicating that they feel like slaves to technology. Interviewees in the present study alluded to feelings of enslavement as a result of the limitations of online reservations and buying, such as limitations on complex travel itineraries and the limitations that result from the nature of the online reservations.

New VS Obsolete

Continuous technological innovations constantly make existing technologies obsolete. In an online travel agent scenario this would result from an increase in new online technologies that make existing ones obsolete. Some informants made reference to this paradox, referring to the rate at which travel agents' electronic services are changing and the implications for customers having to continually learn new online procedures. Thus, John remarked: *I started using telephone reservations and ticketing, and by the time I got accustomed to them I was getting pushed into online bookings and electronic tickets.* One informant envisioned a situation in the future where a small device (like a palmtop) will be owned by consumers that facilitates all travel purchasing activities. Many other informants visualised that all future transactions with travel agents will be performed over their mobile telephones (m-commerce), expressed by Niki: *Well*, *next… all these services will be available through your mobile telephone, that can allow you to do all your travel shopping from any place.*

While some interviewees noted the tendency for online travel agents' technologies to change over time, the new/obsolete paradox was not as salient to the interviewees in this study as for those in Mick and Fournier's study. The difference may result from the nature of the technologies being discussed in both studies. Mick and Fournier's informants discussed products such as computers, music records, and answering machines that are normally purchased for recreational use and become regularly outdated. Interviewees to this study discussed online travel agents' technology, which is used for service delivery processes.

Online agents purchase the software necessary for the service delivery process and it is likely that the technological innovation and their obsolescence would have a greater impact on the agents than on consumers.

Competence VS Incompetence

The interviewees indicated they feel competent when they feel they have the ability to complete their own online transactions successfully. However, their ignorance of how some electronic air ticket and check-in modes work and their inability to comprehend the full capabilities of some online reservations modes can make them feel incompetent. The feeling of competence is best illustrated by the comment of Fotini: *I find online ticketing (for air travel easy to use. I have also mastered the electronic check-in system, which is good. I even use the seat selection service and I have had no problems with it.* On the other hand, Panagiotis's comments illustrated just the opposite: *So I visited that e-ticketing website and I thought I do not know how to do this, I know that you can buy and issue an electronic ticket through the Internet but I do not know how... I do not always trust myself with travel agents' websites because I am not totally familiar with them.*

Mick and Fournier's informants made reference to technologies that are normally accompanied by operational manuals. They indicated that after using the manuals if they understood how and why a technology works like it does, they felt competent. If they still did not understand how the particular technology works they felt incompetent. The online travel reservations and purchasing modes have no equivalent to operational manuals that can assist consumers with their transactions. Thus, consumers who require assistance with the different online travel product modes have to directly access the travel agents, and cannot make effective use of online services. This perceived lack of resources and training may influence consumers' feelings of incompetence.

Efficiency VS Inefficiency

The use of technology may result in some tasks taking less time and effort, elaborated by Nick: *(Internet ticketing for air travel) is straight forward straight through. You are not waiting for somebody to pick up the phone, and you are not listening to music.* It can also result in inefficiency when tasks require more time and effort, such as for Olivia: *For me I just hate to waste my time. It is just aimless sitting there on the computer screen with a website giving you orders like "press this button here, click this link after that, etc".*

This paradox was discussed relative to online travel agents' transactions and transactions conducted in the travel agents' stores with human travel consultants; online transactions were generally felt by interviewees to be more efficient than dealing with an employee.

Electronic travel transactions are considered efficient when consumers can perform their requests and complete their transactions without going through numerous visual cues and "steps" provided by the travel agent's website, and without visiting a travel agent's bricks-and-mortar store. However, these transactions are perceived to sometimes result in inefficiency when consumers have to follow each of the cues/steps provided by both booking/purchasing modes in order to perform their transactions or when the failure of an electronic booking/purchasing mode results in the consumer having to visit a travel agent's outlet.

Fulfils VS Creates

Mick and Fournier found this paradox to be subtle and only discussed in relation to the ownership and use of computers. Some of their informants indicated that the computers they own help fulfil various needs, whilst others felt pressure to own computers and/or acquire the knowledge required to utilise them. Similarly, the interviewees in this study indicated that online travel agents' technology has led to the fulfilment of many of their travel needs, such as the easy booking of hotel accommodation and paperless airline tickets.

However, for some interviewees the advent of electronic travel services has resulted in the identification of previously unrealised needs. Examples of such needs are the desire to own computers and the need to learn and understand how to conduct electronic travel transactions. The former is taken up by Michael when he said: *I find computers are good. They are very good when I want to buy an airline ticket at any time of the day, seven days a week; while the latter in Fotis's comment: I would like to do it (online travel services). But, I haven't got a computer at home and I haven't got frequent access to a computer.* Therefore, the most salient need amongst the interviewees that related to this paradox seemed to be the need to own and/or understand how to use computers. They implied that if they owned computers and fully understood how they work and how to use them, they would be more inclined to use online travel services.

Assimilation VS Isolation

The interviewees made no direct or implicit references to online travel services fostering human togetherness; however they indicated that it can result in isolation. Forman and Sriram (1991) state that for lonely consumers the purpose of shopping is not only to gain goods and services but also to gain and maintain social contacts. Similarly, some interviewees enjoyed personal interaction with travel consultants, viewing their travel shopping activities as social events. For these interviewees, online travel services are creating isolation by destroying their interaction and relationships with travel agents' personnel. For example, Ria comments: *I want the service at the travel agent's store. I want the local travel agent. I want to go to a travel consultant who knows me and who has helped me before. They have closed the travel agents' stores that bring in the trade to all these shops.*

The quote suggests that the traditional travel shopping methods encouraged human togetherness as a result of the interactions between customers and travel agents' staff and interaction of consumers at shopping centres. The quote implies that electronic travel services facilitate isolation because it leads to the closure of the brick and mortar travel agents, consequently reducing the traffic in shopping and business centres.

Engaging VS Disengaging

Mick and Fournier found that technology is engaging when it facilitates certain tasks and disengaging when it results in confusion and chaos. Online travel services are engaging when they facilitate the flow of activities such as easy access to accommodation reservations, airline tickets issuing, rent a car reservations and electronic check-ins. However, it is disengaging when the electronic travel service mode does not facilitate the transactions required by the respondent. Both can be identified in the comments made by Andreas. The engagement is illustrated by the following: *I think the biggest benefit of it is that you have got access to not just the travel agents but to all other companies offering travel products, like hotels, airlines, cruising and car rental. You can access their offers and make up your own holiday package. At the same time, certain aspects Andreas finds disengaging: The most annoying thing I have had on Internet is something happened to my security certificate on my computer. It meant using all that time and going into the travel agent and starting from scratch again.*

Mick and Fournier found this paradox to be hypothetical, stating that it is a noteworthy paradox even though their informants rarely alluded to it. The paradox was more prevalent in this study with informants suggesting that they are motivated to use electronic travel services technology because it facilitates their travelling; it allows them to perform all their travel purchases. The difference in perception of this paradox may be a result of the technologies being discussed. The processual (as opposed to recreational) use of online travel agents' technologies may lead consumers to place particular emphasis on their engaging aspects.

CONCLUSIONS

This study sought to explore consumers' experiences with technology-assisted service encounters by investigating the applicability of Mick and Fournier's paradoxes of technology adoption to the online travel agent industry in Greece.

The findings support those of existing research which suggests that consumers can develop multiple attitudes towards certain source elements, resulting in existence of contradictory views and attitudes (Kidder et al. 1986; Minichiello et al. 1995; Mick and Fournier 1998; Schneider and Currim 2001). In terms of Mick and Fournier's paradoxes, the findings of this study indicate that when consumers use technology assisted service encounters for travel agents' services they are most likely to experience control/chaos, freedom/enslavement, competence/incompetence, efficiency/ inefficiency, engaging/disengaging, assimilation/isolation paradoxes and least likely to experience the new/obsolete paradox.

While most of the discussions of the paradoxes were similar between the two studies, there were areas of difference in the control/chaos, freedom/enslavement, new/obsolete and engaging/ disengaging paradoxes. It appears likely that a central cause of these differences was the types of technologies investigated. In terms of the new/obsolete paradox, while consumers can own computers they typically own these items for purposes beyond electronic travel shopping. They are not responsible for the travel agents' software programs that require constant innovation. As such, the notions of new and obsolete appear to have less relevance to users of electronic travel services.

In regards to the control/chaos paradox, perceptions of control differed markedly between the two studies. Mick and Fournier's informants indicated that technology is powerful and it controls them and directs their activities. The interviewees of this study suggested that online travel agents' technology gives them the power to control their travel shopping activities. In terms of the freedom/enslavement paradox, Mick and Fournier's informants indicated that they sometimes feel like slaves to technology, while the interviewees in this study did not feel like slaves. Instead, they felt that their activities are limited by the nature of the electronic travel agents' technologies. Finally, Mick and Fournier did not find the engaging/disengaging as paradox prevalent as it was in this study. This again may be because of the products used in the analyses.

This study has several limitations. The generalisability of these findings is limited by the small sample of 30 interviewees used. It is not known the extent to which factors such as the nature of the technology selected and the demographic characteristics of those sampled influenced the interpretation. Further research is required to assess the extent to which these findings are representative of Greeks in general and the applicability of these paradoxes to technology-assisted service encounters in other industries and in other countries.

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