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The influence of the assessment of internet websites offering tourist services on the manner of purchase of holiday packages

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to answer the following question: how does the trust of websites offering tourist services influence the manner of purchase of accommodation services and holiday packages? Data were obtained from 505 respondents via an Internet-based questionnaire between May and October 2015. All of the respondents were Polish Internet users. Individuals who both sought information on tourist services and purchased the services offline indicated that the websites of hotels, travel agencies, and tour operators are the most credible. Another group who held a high opinion of hotels and tourist intermediaries' websites was composed of people characterised by the 'research online, purchase offline' (ROPO) effect or the reverse-ROPO effect. People who searched for information on holiday packages and bought them via the Internet held a lower opinion of websites of hotels, travel agents, and tour operators. Research indicates that with respect to the assessment of the credibility of websites offering tourist services, there are significant differences between individuals seeking information on tourist services online and those who purchase such services online.

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1. Introduction

The Internet plays a major role for people seeking information regarding tourist services (Buhalis & Law, 2008; Buhalis & O'Connor, 2005; Fotis, Buhalis, & Rossides, 2011; Nalazek, 2010; Neuhofer, Buhalis, & Ladkin, 2015; Szopiński, 2009; Pawlicz, 2012). As Benkler states, we are currently experiencing a period of socio-economic transformation, which is the outcome of a technological shock that has shaken the foundations of the basic models of information, knowledge, and culture production (Benkler, 2008, p. 399). The Internet has provided both buyers and sellers with new tools that allow interplay between the two parties. Consumers have the possibility to share and seek information and opinions on goods and services via social networking websites, such as blogs, forums, services that aggregate opinions on goods and service (for example TripAdvisor.com),

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price comparison websites (for example skyscanner.net, kayak.com), and online auction websites (for example priceline.com), etc. Conversely, sellers have new means of monitoring Internet user behaviour, which, in turn, has allowed them to employ dynamic prices that differ for various clients wishing to buy the same product or service depending on, for example, previous purchases, place of residence, and level of interest displayed toward a given product related to the time spent on the website. Moreover, the situation as it relates to buyers, suppliers of goods and services and intermediaries has undergone change (Szopiński, 2012).

Along with the development of the Internet, the number of intermediaries who sell tourist services in exchange for a commission has increased as well (Gregori & Daniele, 2011). The growing number of online intermediaries gives rise to issues of trust, for example, payment for services. In the market of travel services, we notice not only global tendencies but also an array of trends typical of the Polish tourism market. Following the accession of Poland to the European Union, there has been an increase in the popularity of air travel services (Szopiński & Nowacki, 2015). Lower air travel costs have resulted in popular all-inclusive packages. Recently, however, in Poland, several tour operators have gone bankrupt. This situation in the Polish market has worsened due to a decrease in the interest exhibited in trips to resorts in countries such as Egypt, Turkey, and Tunisia. At one time, the Polish population purchased a majority of the all-inclusive trips to these countries. However, problems have had a negative influence on the trust that Polish people place in tour operators, and consumers of tourist services are particularly vulnerable to information asymmetry. The problem of information asymmetry was raised by G. A. Akerlof at the beginning of the 1970s when he investigated the used car market (Akerlof, 1970), a market where the seller is better informed than the buyer. Despite the lapse of over 40 years since the paper addressing the issue of information asymmetry was written by Akerlof, the subject is one that continues to provoke many discussions. The problem of information asymmetry is particularly acute in the hotel services market. One reason for this is that the geographical distance between the service provider and the buyer makes it difficult for the buyer to assess the quality of service before purchasing, and the buyer is often misled by dishonest sellers. In truth, buyers only learn about the actual quality of the service after they have arrived at their destination and have no opportunity to change their service provider. Numerous authors deliberate on the problem of such misinformation in tourism in their papers (Nalazek, 2010).

The author of this article examines the influence of trust placed in websites offering tourist services on the manner of purchase of holiday packages by Polish consumers. A holiday package encompasses services such as accommodation, transport from the airport to a hotel, food, insurance, residents' care, and other attractions near the place of accommodation.

The structure of the article is as follows. The paper begins with a review of the literature regarding the problem of access to information by consumers who intend to buy tourist services, and the use of the Internet when seeking information about travel services and the purchase of such services. This is followed by the presentation of the research problem. The sections that follow discuss the research sample and the results of the study. Finally, conclusions and recommendations for managers from the tourism sector are provided.

2. Literature overview

2.1. *The impact of the Internet on consumer behaviour in the market of tourist services*

An example of a market posing many threats to consumers is the travel market. The results of previous research conducted by Maciejewski in 2009 with the use of direct interviews indicate that nearly 60% of Polish consumers are aware of the risk involved in purchasing tourist services (Maciejewski, 2010, p. 202). The impossibility of verifying the quality of the travel product before purchase and consumption requires that the risk be reduced by obtaining the largest possible amount of information, and the more complex the travel product, the greater the amount of information needed (Nalazek, 2010, p. 51). Moreover, the demand for information grows along with the cultural distance that separates travellers from the place they intend to visit (Nalazek, 2010, p. 51). In the face of an increasing number of creators of tourist information, control over the quality and regulations regarding the amount of information is increasingly crucial. The need for assistance in finding the right information, especially on the part of individual tourists who are not fully aware of how the system works, is becoming increasingly acute. Advertising in the press, on the radio, on billboards and at tourist fairs and tourist information centres appears to be having increasingly less influence on the decisions of consumers about where to travel. At the same time, the Internet is gaining in importance as a tool for collecting and comparing information and making decisions related to the purchase of tourist services (Sotiriadis, & van Zyl, 2013). Preferences for shopping online or offline were shown to vary across products, consumers, and stages of the shopping experience (Levin, Levin, & Weller, 2005). Tourists' use of various forms of travel information that is provided by means of modern technologies is closely dependent on the stage of the journey. The level of implementation of modern technologies in the process of searching for tourist information is at its peak during the preparation for the journey, when the tourist is at their place of residence in Poland (Pawlicz, 2012, p. 112). The problem is a lack of full substitution of private and public systems. Internet-based systems of tourist information, which are created by private entities, only encompass the services rendered by the partners of the system and disregard the tourist attractions of the region (Pawlicz, 2012, p. 115). Thus, the consumer seeking information on tourist services is faced not only with the problem of comparing service prices, which vary immensely, but also with problems related to service quality and reliable service performance.

Modern information and communication technologies (ICT) have offered tourism new marketing and management tools (Buhalis & Law, 2008) and contributed to the emergence of many new types of services in the travel market (Kabassi, 2010), and accordingly, they have changed the way consumers seek information regarding tourist services and how they purchase such services (Szopiński & Nowacki, 2014). The digitalisation of distribution channels and the development of electronic and mobile trade (e-commerce and m-business) have altered the mode of market transactions, which has exerted a considerable influence on intermediary tourist services (Kachniewska, 2014). The development of modern technologies has influenced interactions between consumers of tourist services and tour operators as well as travel agencies. The term 'travel agency' denotes a business entity whose business operations mainly or solely revolve around the rendering of intermediary or organisational tourist services (Konieczna-Domańska, 2008, p. 17), whereas a tour operator is an entity

acting as the link between the sphere of producers of fragmentary tourist services and the sphere of consumers of tourist services. As such, tour operators act directly when they sell tour packages by themselves, and they act indirectly when they sell such packages through an intermediary such as a travel agency. In other words, travel agencies are the intermediary link in sales between the producers of fragmentary services and tour operators on the one hand and the consumers of tourist services on the other hand (Konieczna-Domańska, 2008, p. 21).

An array of factors influences the propensity of consumers to use the Internet for the purpose of obtaining information about tourist services and purchasing such services. The fundamental factor motivating consumers to use the Internet in the course of selecting a tourist service is the financial factor (Chiam, Soutar, & Yeo, 2009; Elhaj, 2012; Jensen, 2012). Other factors that influence the propensity to purchase tourist services online include perceived usefulness (Nunkoo & Ramkissoon, 2013), trust (Amaro & Duarte, 2015; Nunkoo & Ramkissoon, 2013; Wen, 2009), and perceived risks (Amaro & Duarte, 2015; Jensen, 2012; Nunkoo & Ramkissoon, 2013). According to Ku and Fan (2009), privacy, safety, and product quality were the three most important factors influencing customer purchases of tourism services on the Internet. Travellers who expect convenience are more willing to purchase tourist services via the Internet (Jensen, 2009), whereas store-enjoyment orientation is negatively related to online purchases (Jensen, 2012).

An array of socio-economic factors also impacts the use of the Internet for the purpose of purchasing tourist services. These factors include levels of income (Card, Chen, & Cole, 2003; Toh, DeKay, & Raven, 2011), age (Kim, Xiang, & Fesenmaier, 2015; Szopiński & Staniewski, 2016; Toh et al., 2011), gender, education level, occupation, professional position, and country of origin (Szopiński & Staniewski, 2016). Furthermore, it was determined that women conduct far more research regarding potential hotels and rates than do men (Toh et al., 2011), and that different generations use slightly different channels for information and transactions (Kim et al., 2015).

The choice of Internet websites from which consumers make purchases of tourist services depends on a group of criteria that are divided into three groups, namely, appraisal (e.g., reputation, credit, privacy policy), web functionalities (personalisation, access to multimedia, ease of purchase), and products and prices (promotions, appropriate prices, client needs) (Wang, 2012).

The factors that influence the purchase of hotel services by tourists via the Internet include the quality of the website that makes it possible to buy the service (Wen, 2009; Yan & Li-Ming, 2015), earlier experiences with online purchasing (Yan & Li-Ming, 2015), and customer satisfaction (Wen, 2009). Individuals who purchase hotel services over the Internet purchase more room-nights than persons who purchase such services through the traditional channel (Toh et al., 2011).

Magnini and Carande (2011) conducted an analysis of consumer behaviours regarding the purchasing of tourist services via various distribution channels. In contrast to persons who use the telephone channel to purchase hotel services and flight tickets, persons purchasing the same services via the Internet take into account a larger number of possibilities; they display less loyalty towards a brand; they are less frequent buyers; and they see a greater level of risk of unavailability regarding the service being sought.

The Internet has intensified the complexity of the travel decision-making process (Jun, Vogt, & MacKay, 2007). The findings of Wang and Law (2007) provide further evidence of

the complementarity effects of ICT on travel, suggesting that the wide application of ICT probably results in more travel. Furthermore, travel experience influences travellers' intentions to shop for travel products online (Jensen, 2012). The motivations behind the online shopping for travel products of low and high complexity are distinctly different. For example, online shopping motivations vary depending on the skill levels of the users (Beldona, Morrison, & O'Leary, 2005). Furthermore, the experiences of travellers regarding the use of the Internet has a positive influence on their purchasing of tourist services via the Internet (Jensen, 2009). The need for greater diversification with respect to offers further creates a positive impact on the propensity to purchase tourist services via the Internet (Jensen, 2009).

Consumer opinions influence the manner in which the markets function. Malbon (2013) focuses on the fact that marketers and their principals are exposed to the temptation to generate false consumer opinions. In many countries, the law prohibits such practices (for example, in the USA and European Union countries). The detection of false opinions is complicated, however. Malbon believes that politicians and institutions dealing with consumer protection must take the problem of false reviews seriously, as such false opinions hamper the countering of information asymmetry between sellers and buyers (Malbon, 2013). Along with the development of ICT, new possibilities for adopting price discrimination have opened up for service providers (Baye & Morgan, 2002).

The role of social media in the process of planning and purchasing tourist services has become more important as well (Antoniadis, Zafiroopoulos, & Vrana, 2015; Xiang & Gretzel, 2010; Zeng & Gerritsen, 2014). For example, comments generated on the Facebook network influence hotel-booking intentions, and the content of comments from existing customers affects the intentions of potential customers who read these comments. As such, they may either motivate or discourage the purchase of goods and services from a particular seller (Ladhari & Michaud, 2015). Moreover, the assessment of opinions regarding the goods and services that are posted by Internet users is a complex issue. The evaluations of goods and services are not solely dependent on the credibility of consumers/Internet users who write the comments, but they are also impacted by the way the readers of the opinions influence (or endorse) the credibility of the reviewers by posting their own comments below the reviews (Mackiewicz, 2010). Social media have raised new possibilities for deceivers as well (Tsikerdekis & Zeadally, 2014), and the physical distance between the seller and the potential client has introduced new threats (Tsikerdekis & Zeadally, 2014). Thus, it is more difficult to evaluate the real intentions of the seller (Szopiński, 2009).

Frag, Schwanen, Dijst, and Faber (2007) claim that online searching positively affects the frequency of shopping trips, which in turn positively influences online purchasing. The process of seeking information about tourist services and the manner of engagement in the pre-journey stage are different. The method of searching for information on tourist services and the means by which those services are purchased vary depending on the category of the tourist product that is purchased as well as the buyer's travel experience (Jun et al., 2007). The Internet and the content created by the users have changed the way people plan, buy, and consume tourist services. The situation puts the major role of traditional travel agencies into question. Del Chiappa (2013) claims that there is a difference between people who purchase tourist services online occasionally, on a moderate basis, and often. Apart from that, age, gender, education, income, online buying experience, and readiness to be influenced by the content created by users and their choices also have a significant impact on purchasing tourist services online. The Internet is more often chosen for the purpose

of buying hotel services by people who make hotel reservations for a short period of time and for short distances (Del Chiappa, 2013). The study by Law, Leung, and Wong indicates that both Internet-based and traditional distribution channels for tourist services have a future (Law, Leung & Wong, 2004). The implementation of the online purchase channel has drastically reduced the premium price quoted by intermediaries. It does not, however, mean that the intermediaries are necessarily worse off as a result of the implementation of the online channel (Lu, Yang, & Yuksel, 2015).

3. Research methodology

An analysis was conducted on data obtained from 505 respondents. The data were collected by means of an Internet-based questionnaire between May and October 2015. These questionnaires had to be fully completed. The aim of this article is to answer the following question: how does the trust towards websites offering tourist services influence the manner of purchase of holiday packages? The level of trust respondents place in the websites offering tourist services was measured on a five-point Likert scale that included the following options: absolutely not credible, somewhat not credible, difficult to say, rather credible, and absolutely credible. The manner of purchase is understood by the author of this paper to include the method of searching for information and the method of making payments for services. Consumers distinguish between the places they seek information about goods and services from the places where they conduct the sales transaction and pay for the goods and services (Balakrishnan, Sundaresan, & Zhang, 2014; Google, TNS OBOP, 2015; Heitz-Spahn, 2013; Maçık, 2015; Pookulangaraa, Hawley, & Xiao, 2011). The first tested way of purchasing holiday packages is based on searching for information about package holidays on the Internet as well as purchasing these services over the Internet. The second way concerns the search for information regarding holiday packages via the Internet but then purchasing these services through an offline channel (the 'research online, purchase offline' (ROPO) effect). The third way involves searching for information about holiday packages offline but then purchasing these services over the Internet (the reverse-ROPO). The fourth way involves seeking information with respect to holiday packages offline and then also purchasing these services offline. Finally, the fifth way applies to those people who are not looking for information about holiday packages, nor do they purchase such services. The analysed websites offering sales of travel services include the websites of hotels, the websites of travel intermediaries that offer services of various tour operators, and the websites of tour operators themselves.

Three hypotheses concerning the correlations between the perception of Internet websites that allow consumers to purchase tourist services and the manner by which they make their purchases of package services were proposed:

H₁: There is a statistically significant correlation between the consumer's evaluation of the credibility of hotels' websites and the manner by which the consumer purchases holiday packages.

H₂: There is a statistically significant correlation between the consumer's evaluation of the credibility of travel agencies' websites and the manner by which the consumer purchases holiday packages.

H₃: There is a statistically significant correlation between evaluation of the credibility of tour operators' websites and the manner of purchasing package holidays. The analysis of the data was conducted using a nonparametric Chi-square test of independence, whereas Czaprow's coefficient was employed to measure the power of the correlations and analyse the correlations. The Chi-square test was employed to examine the dependency between trust placed in websites offering travel services and the manner of purchase of travel services.

4. Sample

The SurveyMonkey.com tool was adopted by the author to create the questionnaires and collect data.

A link to the questionnaire along with an invitation to complete it were sent to the users of Goldenline.pl. This portal brings together people interested in pursuing a career and offers a possibility to share information and experiences, both professional in nature (obtained in various sectors) and experiences related to various hobbies. Furthermore, information about the study and a request to complete the questionnaire were posted on Facebook.com. The post initiated a snowball effect such that many people were sharing information about the study with their friends on Facebook.com. To minimise the probability that a questionnaire could be submitted twice by the same person, the possibility to do so using the same computer was blocked. Of the respondents, 66.7% were women and 33.3% were men; 28.3% were people aged between 19 and 24 years and 20.6% were between 25 and 29 years of age. The most numerous group, 32.1%, were people aged between 30 and 39, whereas 13.5% were between 40 and 49. People between 50 and 59 represented 4.6% of the respondents, and only 1.0% were 60 years old or older.

With respect to the financial circumstances of the respondents, 7.0% earned less than PLN 1000 (approximately 240 €); 22.9% earned more than PLN 1000 but less than 2000 (more than 240 € but less than 480 €); 21.8% earned between PLN 2001 and 3000 (more than 480 € but less than 720 €); 11.5% earned between PLN 3001 and 4000 (more than 720 € but less than 960 €); 5.3% earned between PLN 4001 and 5000 (more than 960 € but less than 1200 €); 6.3% earned between PLN 5001 and 6000 (more than 1200 € but less than 1440 €); 3.8% earned between PLN 6001 and 8000 (more than 1440 € but less than 1920 €); and 5.6% earned PLN 8000 or more (more than 1920 €). The net income of 2.8% of the respondents was undetermined, whereas 13.1% refused to provide information regarding their earnings. PLN 1 is equivalent to 0.24 EUR, 0.27 USD. The questionnaire was completed by people from various regions of Poland. No information about the voivodeship (administrative area) to which the respondents belonged was collected. The questionnaire only gathered data regarding the size of the place of residence. The residents of villages represented 12.9% of the respondents, the residents of towns with up to 10,000 citizens represented 5.5% of the respondents, and the residents of cities with more than 10,000 but less than 50,000 citizens comprised 11.9%. The residents of cities with more than 50,000 but less than 200,000 citizens comprised 8.1% of the respondents, and 15.0% of the respondents lived in cities with more than 200,000 but no more than 500,000 citizens. The majority of the participants in the study (46.5%) were residents of large cities (populations over 500,000).

5. Results

From among all of the respondents, 77.3% declared that they had sought information on holiday packages, whereas 65.7% of the respondents claimed they had purchased holiday packages. The first group of individuals are those who sought information on holiday packages on the Internet and purchased these services over the Internet as well. This is the largest group, as it includes 43.4% of the respondents. The second group, which accounts for 21.1% of the respondents, is composed of people who sought information on holiday packages on the Internet and then purchased these services via an offline channel (the ROPO effect). The third group, which encompasses 7.7% of the respondents, are people who sought information about holiday packages offline but then purchased these services over the Internet (the reverse-ROPO). The fourth group was composed of 10.1% of the respondents. These are individuals who sought information on holiday packages offline and also purchased these services offline. Finally, the fifth group, 21.6% of the respondents, comprised persons who did not search for information on holiday packages, nor did they purchase such services.

A statistically significant correlation exists between the respondents' evaluation of the credibility of hotels' websites and the manner of purchase of holiday packages ($\chi^2 = 40.788$, $df = 16$, $p = 0.001$), although the correlation between the variables is not strong. The Czuprow's (T_{xy}) coefficient is 0.146, and thus, Hypothesis 1 is supported. Table 1 displays the percentage distribution of the responses regarding the evaluation of the credibility of hotels' websites in the groups whose members declared that they sought information on holiday packages but purchased such services using different methods. Hotels' websites were evaluated as the most credible by people who sought information on holiday packages offline and purchased them offline. Those who sought information on holiday packages online and then purchased them offline also held a high opinion regarding the credibility of hotels' websites. People who made use of the Internet in the course of seeking and purchasing holiday packages evaluated hotels' websites as less credible than persons who went through the entire process of seeking information and purchasing offline.

A statistically significant correlation exists between the respondents' evaluation of the credibility of intermediaries' websites displaying offers of various tour operators and the manner of purchase of holiday packages ($\chi^2 = 43.446$, $df = 16$, $p = 0.001$). The correlation between the variables is not strong. The Czuprow's (T_{xy}) coefficient is 0.150, and thus, Hypothesis 2 is supported. Table 2 presents the percentage distribution of the responses with

Table 1. Credibility of hotels' websites: opinions of respondents versus manner of purchasing of holiday packages (in percentages).

Specification manner of purchase	Absolutely not credible	Somewhat not credible	Difficult to say	Rather credible	Absolutely credible	Total
Search and buy online	1.4	15.1	23.3	49.3	11.0	100.0
Search online/ buy offline	0.0	11.5	18.0	62.3	8.2	100.0
Search offline/ buy online	10.3	7.7	25.6	48.7	7.7	100.0
Search and buy offline	0.0	7.8	9.8	68.6	13.7	100.0
Not searching and not buying	8.3	14.7	30.3	42.2	4.6	100.0

Source: Author's investigation.

Table 2. Credibility of intermediaries' websites: opinions of respondents versus manner of purchasing of holiday packages (in percentages).

Specification manner of purchase	Absolutely not credible	Somewhat not credible	Difficult to say	Rather credible	Absolutely credible	Total
Search and buy online	1.4	12.0	34.3	45.4	6.9	100.0
Search online/ buy offline	1.6	13.1	31.1	52.5	1.6	100.0
Search offline/ buy online	0.0	15.4	23.1	53.8	7.7	100.0
Search and buy offline	2.0	17.6	21.6	49.0	9.8	100.0
Not searching and not buying	7.3	24.5	40.9	26.4	0.9	100.0

Source: Author's investigation.

Table 3. Credibility of tour operators' websites: opinions of respondents versus manner of purchasing holiday packages (in percentages).

Specific manner of purchase	Absolutely not credible	Somewhat not credible	Difficult to say	Rather credible	Absolutely credible	Total
Search and buy online	2.3	9.5	34.1	47.7	6.4	100.0
Search online/ buy offline	0.0	15.3	35.6	40.7	8.5	100.0
Search offline/ buy online	0.0	13.2	31.6	42.1	13.2	100.0
Search and buy offline	5.9	9.8	17.6	49.0	17.6	100.0
Not searching and not buying	8.3	11.0	46.8	33.0	0.9	100.0

Source: Author's investigation.

respect to the evaluation of the credibility of intermediaries' websites displaying offers of various tour operators in the groups whose members declared that they sought information on holiday packages and purchased such services using different methods. Intermediaries' websites displaying the offers of various tour operators were evaluated as the most credible by people who searched for information on holiday packages offline but purchased such services online. These people evaluated the intermediaries' websites displaying the offers of various tour operators as credible more often than people who both sought information on holiday packages and bought the packages online.

A statistically significant correlation exists between the respondents' evaluation of the credibility of tour operators' websites and the manner of purchase of holiday packages ($\chi^2 = 42.699$, $df = 16$, $p = 0.001$). However, the correlation between the variables is not strong. The Czaprow's (T_{xy}) coefficient is 0.149, and thus, Hypothesis 3 is supported. Table 3 displays a percentage distribution of the evaluation responses regarding the credibility of tour operators' websites in the groups whose members declared that they sought information on holiday packages and purchased such services using different methods. Tour operators' websites were evaluated as the most credible by people who searched offline for information on holiday packages but bought such services online as well as persons who sought information offline and purchased them offline. These people evaluated tour operators' websites

that display the offers of various tour operators as credible more often than people who both sought information on holiday packages and purchased the packages online.

6. Conclusion and recommendation

Individuals who seek information on tourist services and purchase them offline believe that the websites of hotels, travel agencies, and tour operators are the most credible. This may be because they overestimate the advantages of such websites due to the fact that they have no experience in buying tourist services online, and thus, they may be unaware of the problems associated with the influence of the Internet regarding the dissemination of misinformation related to the tourism market.

Another group who held a high opinion of hotels and tourist intermediaries' websites was composed of people characterised by the ROPO effect. First, they searched for information online and finalised the purchase offline. However, the purchases of people who held a high opinion of tour operators' websites were accompanied by the reverse-ROPO effect, that is, they searched for offers offline and then made the purchase online. People who used the offline channel at a certain stage of the purchase process evaluated the websites of entities offering tourist services or travel intermediaries to be credible. Interestingly, people who searched for information on holiday packages and finalised purchases of such services via the Internet held a much lower opinion of the websites of hotels, travel agencies, and tour operators.

The empirical results of this research highlight several important issues. First, the findings confirm that there are significant differences between online purchasers and browsers with respect to their perceptions of certain hotel website attributes. These findings coincide with the results obtained by Rong, Li, and Law (2009). Entities that operate in the travel market must adopt various strategies with respect to clients who prefer different distribution channels for the services they offer. As Wolfe, Hsu, and Kang (2004) stated, the respondents who only used a travel agent to purchase travel arrangements rated the following selection criteria higher than did Internet purchasers: quality service, travel knowledge, friendliness, personal service, reputation, and past experience.

There remains a place in the market for various entities offering tourist services. According to Lu et al. (2015), the position of the intermediary in times dominated by modern ICT has yet to be determined. There are people who have a variety of experiences, and they need advice and help in comparing the many offers from various hotels and tour operators. As stressed by Yan and Li-Ming (2015), the price is not always the key factor in determining the purchase of a hotel service. Therefore, hotels must use various marketing strategies adjusted to different groups of clients. This is the case for travel agencies as well. Travel agencies must use different strategies to retain existing clients and to attract travellers who have used alternative means to secure travel arrangements (Wolfe et al., 2004).

Homogeneous services appear to be better adjusted to sales via the Internet than services that are very diversified (non-homogeneous). Thus, it is expected that consumers will be more willing to buy homogeneous rather than heterogeneous services via the Internet (Agudo-Peregrina, Pascual-Miguel, & Chaparro-Peláez, 2014). It is a challenge to create comparison websites that will assess not only quantitative but also qualitative data, which are difficult to measure. It is also a major challenge to create a platform that will allow for the comprehensive assessment of tourist services. As stated by Xiang, Magnini, and

Fesenmaier (2015), there is currently a race between proprietary accommodation providers (e.g., Hilton hotels) and third-party providers (e.g., Expedia.com) to produce efficient and user-friendly mobile applications, hence, the question: which avenue is receiving the most traffic? There is still a place in the market for various entities to act as intermediaries in the sales of tourist services. Such entities must incorporate intermediaries to create added value for the services they offer. Their operations should be directed at advising and assisting the customer to alleviate the informational chaos. Research indicates that as far as the assessment of credibility of websites offering tourist services is concerned, there are significant differences between individuals seeking information on tourist services online and those who purchase tourist services online.

Finally, there are some limitations that should shape future research in this area. As this study was based on non-random sampling, the results must be validated and generalised using random sampling methods in future research. It was not possible to make generalisations owing to the size of the sample, and thus, it is possible that a study of different nationalities may offer dissimilar results. Therefore, it is important to conduct a cross-cultural study in the future. Further examinations may provide new insights into the influence of consumer trust on the manner of purchase of travel services.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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