A STUDY ON ONLINE BOOKERS' PERCEPTIONS ON THE IMPORTANCE OF WEBSITE QUALITY ATTRIBUTES

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to examine the perceptions of different groups of actual online buyers, both direct and indirect buyers, on the importance of website quality attributes from hotel distribution channels. Self-administered questionnaires were distributed over a 6-week period. A purposive convenience sample of 115 male and female actual online hotel bookers participated. Findings showed that ease of information search and ease of booking were perceived as the most important website quality attributes when booking online irrespective of the subsample. However, direct bookers perceived price-quality relationship to be more important in comparison to secure payment transactions for indirect bookers.

KEYWORDS

E-commerce; hotel distribution; intermediaries; website quality; buyers

RESUMEN

Este estudio tiene como objetivo el examen de la percepción que tienen los diferentes grupos de compradores online, tanto los compradores directos como los indirectos, acerca de la calidad de las webs de los canales de distribución hotelera. Se repartieron cuestionarios durante un periodo de 6 semanas a una muestra de 115 personas, hombres y mujeres. Los resultados mostraron que la facilidad en la búsqueda de la información y la facilidad en efectuar la reserva eran percibidas como las cualidades más importantes de una web. Por otra parte, los compradores directos manifestaron que la relación precio-calidad era lo más importante mientras que la seguridad en el pago lo era para los compradores indirectos

PALABRAS CLAVE

Comercio electrónico, canales de distribución hotelera, intermediarios, calidad de las webs.

INTRODUCTION

In the past, tourism and hospitality consumers were significantly dependent on retail travel agents as they were the primary link in the relationship with customers on behalf of tour operators. Nevertheless, over the last two decades the tourism industry has been very active in the development of direct sell operations. In the 1990's travel distributors' systems were generally co-operating in mutually beneficial relationships (O'Connor and Frew, 2004). However, the emergence of internet and e-commerce in particular has caused companies to take advantage of the new opportunities and developed e-commerce applications (Buhalis and Licata, 2002). As a result, service organisations such as hotels and airlines have been enabled to cut out intermediaries and communicate directly with its customers on a worldwide basis.

The web has blurred the traditional distribution channels and changed the way customers interact with companies and with each other. As suggested by O'Connor and Frew (2002) hotel customers' information search and purchase intentions have significantly changed due to the benefits resulting from e-commerce such as real time information, transparency, convenient reservation systems and 24/7 accessibility.

Nowadays, electronic distribution channels play an increasingly important role in hotels' inventory distribution. Apart from the hotel's own website, the majority of the hotels are utilizing an elaborate portfolio of channels as a means to reach their customers. As proposed by Law and Cheung (2006), a substantial portion of online room reservations is generated through third party websites. Hence, hotels are becoming increasingly dependent on online intermediaries. This means that a high percentage of the hotels' online reservations revenues, ranging from 10-30%, are lost in the form of commissions paid to third parties. In order to reduce the indirect online reservation margin, hoteliers are searching for efficient ways to persuade travelers to reserve rooms directly through hotel owned websites.

LITERATURE REVIEW

DISINTERMEDIATION

In recent years, the distribution of tourism and hospitality products and services has been revolutionized by the growing use of the internet. According to Swarbrooke and Horner (2007) it has reinforced the trend of direct sales and the removal of travel agents from the distribution chain. This process is also better known as disintermediation which according to Kotler at el. (2002: 750) is defined as "more and more, product and service produces are bypassing intermediaries and going directly to final buyers or that radically new types of channels intermediaries are emerging to displace traditional ones". In other words, the elimination of the middleman by using the internet (Law *et al.*, 2004). The rise of internet has lead in the mid 1990's to the emergence of a new type of travel agent also referred to as the online travel agent (Gazzoli *et al.*, 2008). Some examples to be mentioned here are Expedia, Travelocity and Lastminute.com. Apart from the former types of travel suppliers described, various other companies such as internet portals, newspapers and last minutes agencies developed an on-line provision of tourism products.

Overall, it can be said that internet provided suppliers with new independence whereby suppliers decreased their dependence on travel agencies and thus commissions payable.

ONLINE HOTEL DISTRIBUTION

According to O'Connor and Frew "Hotel electronic distribution is in a state of rapid evolution. Channels and channel participants are merging, bypassing one another while simultaneously cooperating and competing with each other" (2002:40). As a result of the technological developments over the last decades, the hospitality industry is applying a multichannel distribution approach, combining traditional and electronic channels. As mentioned earlier, online distribution channels in particular play an increasingly important role in the distribution of a hotels' inventory distribution. Electronic reservation systems are perceived to be more efficient and responsive in comparison to traditional systems (Carroll and Siguaw, 2003). This can mainly be attributed to the perishable nature of hotels' products and services. Advantages as a result of online commerce perceived by hoteliers are for instance more efficient, little administration, no marketing costs for sending printed material, no confirmation and the elimination of personnel costs (Koninklijk Horeca Nederland, 2004). Alike hotels, intermediaries had the economic incentive to distribute products online. As a result, an overabundance of hotel suppliers is to be found on the web which has caused for a highly competitive internet marketplace.

Since online commerce is growing at an impressive rate a substantial base of research has focused on the identification and analysis of factors that can influence and shape customers' behaviour. In particular, researchers have examined the factors that lead to successful tourism and hospitality websites. Website quality and the factors that influence and shape customers' online behaviour have been widely documented in the existing literature and are briefly described in the subsequent section.

WEBSITE QUALITY

Studies have shown that purchase related behavioural intentions are a critical consequence of website quality (Jeong *et al.*, 2003; Law and Bai, 2008, Bai *et al.*, 2008). Law and Bai (2008) and Bai *et al*. (2008) studied the relationship between users' level of satisfaction and purchase intentions with regard to travel websites and arrived at the conclusion that travel website quality factors were positively related to satisfaction which in turn was correlated to customers' purchase intentions. In accordance, Jeong *et al.* (2003) pointed out that online behavioural intentions are influenced by information satisfaction and that website quality is found to be the antecedent of information satisfaction. Similarly, Kim *et al.* (2006) claimed that the former two mentioned factors are the most essential factors affecting customers' willingness to make an online reservation. Also, Kim and Lee (2004) and Morosan and Jeong (2008) indicated that the quality of information and thus website content will increase users' visits and attitudes towards websites. Hence, website quality is recognized to be a prerequisite for driving business online and will therefore contribute to the generation of online transactions. As suggested by Bai *et al*. "website quality is clearly critical in driving traffic, making people stay, and eventually attracting people to repurchase online products" (2008:399). Similarly, Liao *et al.* (2006) argue that high website quality will determine whether customers will purchase or not. This can be clarified by the fact that a website is the primary influence on the formation of consumers' expectations as it often is the only interface between buyer and supplier. So, website quality can significantly affect perceived attitude and image of any e-commerce business.

A substantial base of research in the field of website quality focussed on distinguishing perceptions between online buyers and browsers. Kim and Kim (2004) investigated factors affecting the online reservation intentions across online and non-online customers. It was found that the tested determinants affect the online customers differently based on past purchase experience. Hence, online and non-online customers have different considerations while purchasing online. With regard to online customers, convenience was perceived to be the most important factor followed by transaction, safety, ease of information search and price.

Unlike the online customer, price was perceived to be the most important factor for the non-online customer. Results suggested that for both groups, convenience, price and safety were perceived to affect online reservation intention. Likewise, Cheung and Law (2009) found that secure payment methods and online booking confirmation were significantly more important for buyers than browsers. Similarly, Rong *et al.*, (2009) carried out an investigation on the perceived importance of Western and Asian users on dimensions and attributes of hotel websites. Results confirmed that there is a difference in expectations for hotel websites between online browsers and online purchases. Overall, reservations information, facility information and contact information were perceived to be the most important attributes for hotel websites. In the same direction, Law and Hsu (2006) and Law and Cheung (2006) investigated perceptions of importance across browsers and buyers. Nevertheless, empirical results revealed that there is no significant difference in perceptions between the two sub-samples studied. However, Law and Hsu (2006) state that since online buyers are actual customers who made purchases online their expectations are considered to be higher in comparison to browsers.

After reviewing various published studies on website quality and considering the findings described in the preceding paragraphs, it can be concluded that website quality is of vital importance for stimulating purchase related behavioral intentions online. This means that there is a positive relationship between the quality perceived and customers' tendency to use. So, online consumer behavior is thus greatly influenced by their virtual experience. Considering the nature and differences of online hotel distribution channels, it is of utmost importance to monitor which aspects of website quality attributes are among those sought after by consumers when booking a hotel room online. It can be assumed that online hotel bookers are seeking for particular website attributes when booking a hotel online. So, considering hotels' dependence on third party channels as well as the lack of research articles that attempt to differentiate between direct and indirect bookers' considerations while booking online, it is considered worthwhile investigating actual online bookers' perceptions towards website quality attributes across the two subsamples.

So considering the above information, and as can be interpreted from the conceptual framework below, the present study addresses the issue of website quality attributes with a particular focus on hotel websites and intermediary sites. The problem statement of pertaining to this study is as follows:

Do direct bookers hold different perceptions of website quality
attributes in comparison to indirect bookers?

The research questions underlying this problem statement are formulated as follows:
1. Which internet characteristics induce customers to purchase their hotel stay online?
2. How do online bookers perceive the website quality related attributes?

FIGURE 1: *Conceptual framework*
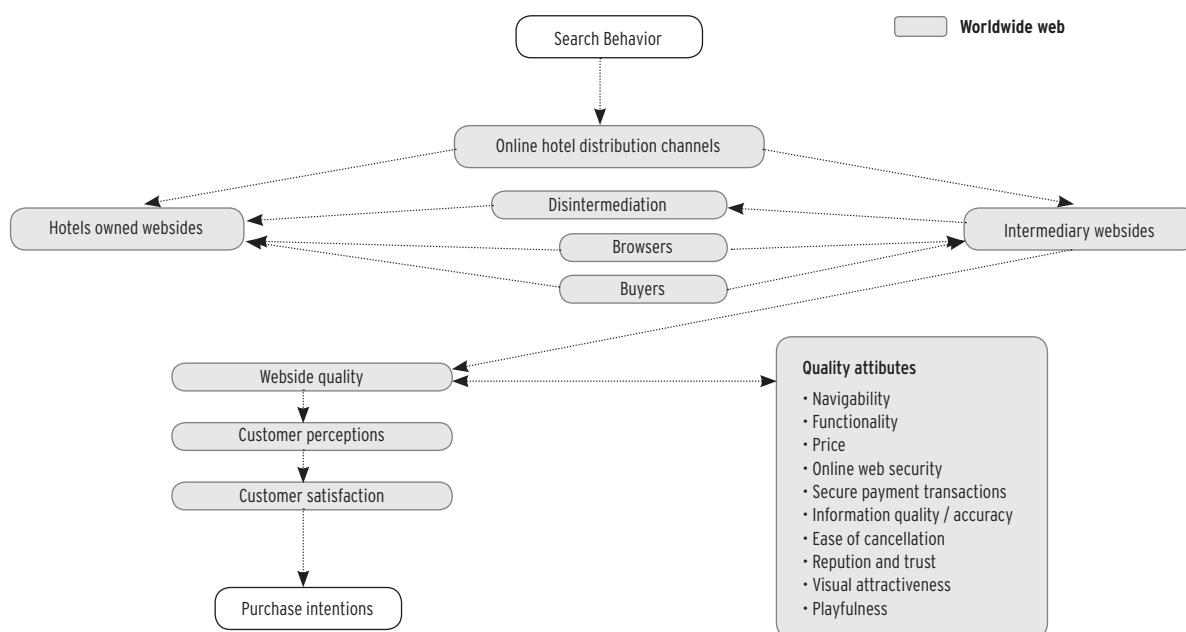
METHODOLOGY

The research method applied to this investigation is survey research, and more specifically, a self-administered questionnaire. Surveys were distributed on-site, either handed over personally or distributed at the guests' hotel room.

SAMPLING

The sampling method applied to this research is a purposive convenient sampling (Blumberg *et al*., 2005). The sample population of this study consists of actual hotel guests visiting Bilderberg Hotel Jan Luyken during the months of June and July. However, a prerequisite for participation was online booking experience. Questionnaires were distributed over a 6 week period starting on the 23rd of June and ending on 1st of August 2010. A total of 254 questionnaires were distributed and 115 refilled questionnaires were returned which is equal to a respondent rate of 45 %. From the 115 questionnaires, a total of 108 were useful for the actual data analysis, representing 94%.

SURVEY INSTRUMENT

The survey was a self-administered questionnaire and was only designed in English. An accompanying letter was attached to the survey wherein the participants were introduced to the investigator, the purpose of the survey as well as the study at hand. The survey was designed with four sections and

a total of thirty questions with mixture of question formats. The four sections covered the following aspects: general information on respondents' hotel stay; respondents' online reservation; respondents' perceptions on website quality attributes as well as their actual online hotel booking and; respondents' demographical data.

MEASUREMENT VARIABLES

As indicated in the former section, the self-administered questionnaire included four sections, each covering different aspects concerned with respondents' online hotel booking. Apart from three questions which were designed as open questions, all questions were provided with answer options, either closed or open response options.

Concerning the measurement variables used, it can be said that there was a mixture of scale and ranking variables. First, the scale variables. As emphasized earlier, the focus of this study is on investigating respondents' perceived importance of website quality determinants. Therefore, measure items for the research constructs were derived from prior studies dealt with in the literature review and of which the majority was used for measuring website quality (Chung and Law, 2003; Kim and Kim, 2004; Law and Hsu, 2006; Rong *et al.*, 2009). A total of 13 measure items were displayed and respondents were asked to rate the level of importance of each determinant using a 4-point Likert scale with anchors of extremely important (4) and not at all important (1). Moreover, in order to investigate respondents' level of satisfaction with their online hotel reservation, seven statements were provided at which respondents were requested to indicate their level of agreement. Again, a 4-point Likert scale was applied with anchors of fully agree (4) and fully disagree (1). Then, with regard to the ranking variables, one single design was applied to three different questions. In order gain insight into the particular measure investigated, a number of items were listed, ranging from ten to thirteen items. Respondents were requested to select three items and place them in order of importance from 1 to 3 with 1 being the most important item.

FINDINGS

Considering the length of the questionnaire as well as the period allocated for the completion of the current study, it should be emphasized that the findings discussed in this section are rather limited as this article is merely a summary of the major findings of importance for the aim of the current study.

RESEARCH SAMPLE PROFILE

The sample population of this study is composed of 47% male and 53% female respondents. However, concerning the subsamples investigated, direct bookers comprised of 58% male and 42% female respondents in comparison to 45% male and 55% female for the indirect bookers. In terms of nationality, Americans were represented most across both subsamples, direct and indirect bookers with 32% and 28% respectively. Nevertheless, the second most recurring nationality for direct bookers was Dutch (21%) in contrast to English (15%) for the indirect bookers.

Also, the age category 41-50 was represented most followed by 31-40, this irrespective of the type of booker.

HOTEL BOOKING AND SEARCH BEHAVIOR

First and foremost, a high proportion of 78% indicated to have only used the internet in their decision-making process for their stay at the Bilderberg Hotel. In terms of booking channel, a slight 18% booked directly through the Bilderberg website whilst 31% of indirect bookers booked through Expedia followed by Bookings (15%) and Hotels.com (7%). Despite the low percentage of direct bookers, 60% of the indirect bookers revealed to have visited the Bilderberg website prior to confirmation of their booking through an intermediary channel. In addition, 73% of the indirect bookers indicated to have purchased before through the same channel. Finally, 42% of those respondents booking directly through the Bilderberg site were familiar with the brand prior to the purchase of their current hotel stay whilst only 11% of those respondents booking through intermediaries were familiar with the brand.
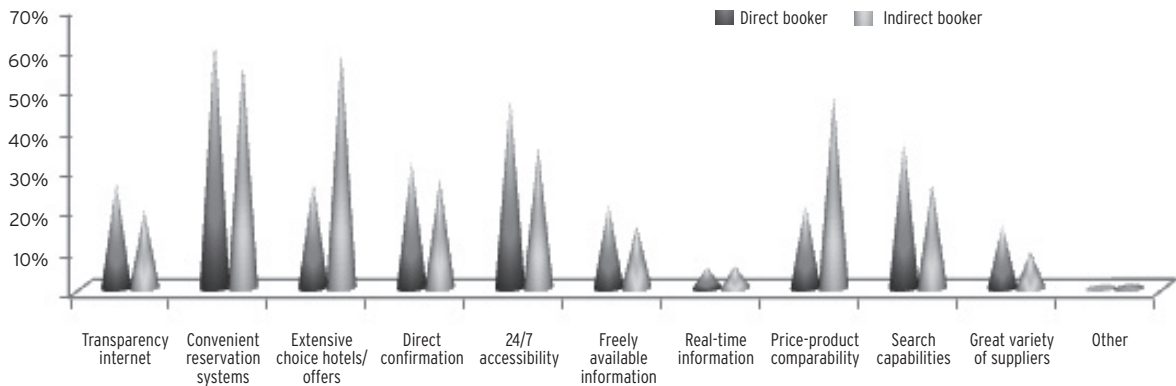
RESEARCH QUESTION TESTING

In order to gain an answer on research question 1 which is formulated as *"Which internet characteristics induce customers to purchase their hotel stay online?"* respondents were requested to indicate three factors out of ten factors displayed and rank these in order of importance as their reasoning for booking a hotel online rather than offline.

According to the total sample, convenient reservation systems (57%); extensive choice of hotels/special offers (53%); and price-product comparability (43%) were perceived as most important factors. However, the item that ranked fourth, referring to 24/7 accessibility was ranked relatively close to the third item with 37%. Nevertheless, when comparing both subsamples investigated, differences in perceptions across direct and indirect bookers were found.

In terms of the subsamples studies, and as can be gathered from figure 2, direct bookers' major motives for booking online are: convenience of online reservation systems; 24/7 accessibility; and search capabilities of the internet. In contrast, indirect bookers perceived the extensive choice of hotels and special offers as most important, followed by convenient reservation systems and price-product comparability.

FIGURE 2: *Motives for booking online: direct vs. indirect bookers*

In order to answer research question 2 "*How do online bookers perceive the website quality related attributes?* respondents were requested to indicate their perceptions of importance on thirteen items in case of booking a hotel online. As can be gathered from figure 3 below, direct and indirect bookers generally hold equal perceptions on those website attributes which are perceived as most important. Although, findings in terms of importance differ slightly across both subsamples, ease of information search and ease of booking are both perceived as most important, irrespective of the type of booker. However, whereas direct bookers perceive price-quality relationship more important than indirect bookers, the latter attach more value to the security of payment transactions.

FIGURE 3: *Perceptions of importance on website quality factors: direct vs. indirect bookers*
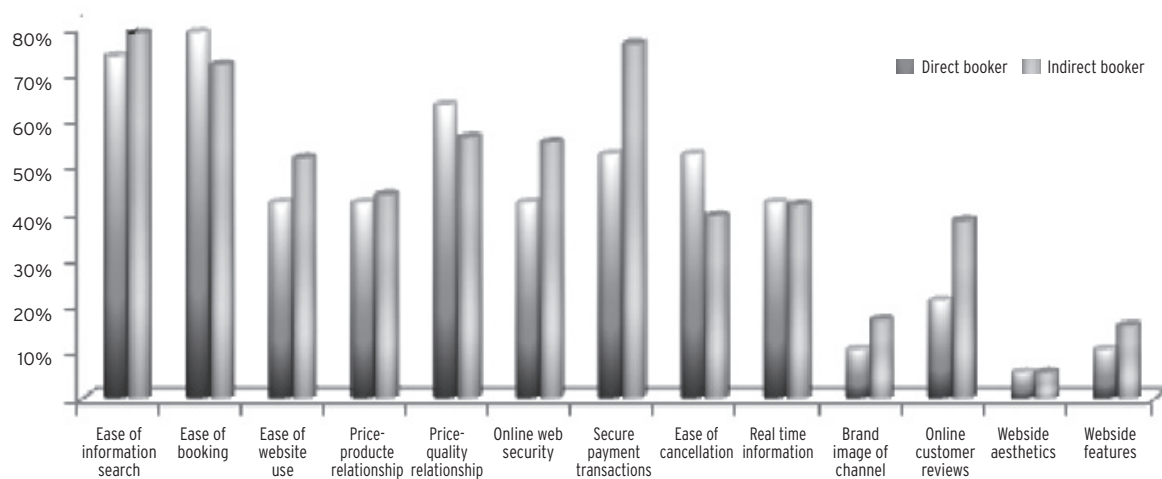
Besides, it should be emphasized that there was a significant difference in perceptions concerning online customer reviews and ease of cancellation. In terms of ease of cancellation, direct and indirect bookers scored 53% and 39% respectively. Additionally, with respect to online customer reviews, only 21% of direct bookers perceived this website attribute as very important in comparison to 38% of indirect bookers.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Since the main aim of this study is investigating whether users' perceptions on the importance of website quality attributes differ between direct and indirect online hotel bookers, this section will discuss the findings pertaining to problem statement of this study.

As indicated in the findings, overall no significant differences were found in perceptions across the two sub-samples studied. Irrespective of the type of booker, ease of information search and ease of booking were considered to be the most important website attributes while booking online. This in line with the findings of Cheung and Law (2006) who suggested that rapid information search was perceived to be the most important factor followed by a user-friendly system.

In accordance, Jeong *et al*. (2003) found information completeness and ease of use to be predictors of behavioral intentions. Similarly, O'Connor and Frew (2002) indicated that the underlying reasons for using electronic distribution channels are twofold: the provision of real time information and convenient reservation systems. Nevertheless, direct bookers ranked price-quality relationship as third in comparison to secure payment transactions for indirect bookers. This is similar to results of a study conducted by Wong and Law (2005) whereby price discounts and security ranked second after quality of information. Furthermore, differences were found concerning the aspects of ease of cancellation and online customer reviews. However, these will be dealt with in the following paragraph.

First of all, direct bookers' value attached to price-quality can be clarified by the fact that in case of booking a hotel directly through a hotel's website, the credibility of the product transmitted is higher in comparison to that of an intermediary. As indicated by Carroll and Siguaw (2003) third party distribution channels have negotiating leverage with regard to hotel's rates and inventory. Their offerings are showed in terms of ascending price or quality. Nevertheless, this is mainly determined by the height of commission paid to the intermediary instead of the actual price-quality relationship. Besides, ease of cancellation was ranked higher by direct bookers, 53% and 39% respectively, which can be attributed to the fact that in contrast to direct bookers indirect bookers are enabled to book the lowest rates through intermediaries, a rate which is generally non-refundable. So, in exchange for the cheapest rate the aspect of cancellation is excluded. In addition, it is presumed that direct bookers in comparison to indirect bookers tempt to be less after last minute offers and/or book on short-term and therefore attach thus more value to the aspect of cancellation. This is supported by the respondents major motives for booking a hotel stay online whereby extensive choice of hotels and special offers was ranked fifth for direct bookers whereas first for indirect bookers.

Then with regard to indirect bookers, motives for booking through intermediaries were investigated. Ease of comparing hotels was by far perceived to be the most important attribute. Additionally, specified search options, customer reviews and price transparency followed in sequence of importance.

In light of the former mentioned factors, it can be assumed that since third party channels serve as intermediaries between customers and hotels, the degree of reliability attached to intermediaries is lower than in case of booking directly through the hotel's own website. Therefore, security, or secure payment transactions was perceived as far more important by indirect bookers in comparison to direct bookers. This is similar to the findings of Law and Wong (2003) who proposed secure payment methods, different price ranges and user-friendly systems as three dimensions that encourage customers to purchase travel products online. So, considering the findings, it can be presumed that indirect bookers tend to be more inclined to shop around for the best deals across several online distribution channels. This is supported by their prime motive for purchasing a hotel stay online which is the extensive choice of hotels and special offers. Also, Wong and Law (2005) suggested price as the most important dimension when making a decision to book. However, customer reviews were found to be a rather important factor in the decision making process of indirect bookers.

Overall, the main conclusion as a result of this study is that in terms of perceptions concerning website quality attributes slight differences were found between the two subsamples studied. Ease of information search and ease of booking were found to be of major importance across both samples. However, slight differences in perceptions were found for the attributes that were ranked after the former mentioned.

MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

Since this investigation was of prime interest for the hotel in which this research was conducted, and considering the findings presented, recommendations are provided in particular for the management of Bilderberg Hotel Jan Luyken. Nevertheless, findings might in general also contribute to the knowledge of practitioners in the Hospitality and Tourism industry as well as students, lectures and anyone interested in the field of e-commerce. However, it should be mentioned that only a small selection of the recommendations are provided in this article.

First of all, with respect to the users' perceptions on website quality attributes, both subsamples perceived ease of information search and ease of booking as the most important attributes while purchasing a hotel stay online. However, as third attribute indirect bookers gave preference to secure payment transactions. In contrast to Dutch customers whom are enabled to pay via iDEAL (online banking), international customers should pay with a credit card which is a more sensible means for payment. In order to transmit a higher sense of credibility, Bilderberg should at least provide a security seal alike the VeriSign seal on its website in order to encourage more bookings of those booking indirectly.

Secondly, as acquired by the findings of this research, 78% of the respondents only used the internet as the information source in their decision making process for their hotel stay. In comparison with a decade ago in which the extent of e-commerce applied in the hospitality industry was still in its infancy stage people were more reticent in respect of solely relying on the internet. As a result, the travel industry should invest more and more in their e-commerce strategy and cut down expenditures on other marketing means and/or distribution sources. For instance, when investigating the number of websites to be consulted when looking for a hotel at random through a particular search engine, the result was on average 7 websites. This means people tempt to consult only those websites which are provided on the first and eventually a few from the second page of a search engine. When typing "hotels in Amsterdam" in the browser of Google, Bilderberg appeared on the fourth page of Google. So, in order to optimize direct online bookings the hotel should invest more in SEO (search engine optimization) such as Google ranking and Google adwords.

Thirdly, 60% of the indirect bookers have consulted the hotel's own website prior to confirming their hotel stay. This relatively high percentage of lookers could have been turned into bookers. In light of this finding it is of utmost importance for hoteliers to provide a website that triggers lookers to buy by offering certain attractive deals. Since hoteliers are not allowed to offer cheaper hotel rates than those offered through third party channels, it is of utmost importance to differentiate in other perspectives. For instance, special offerings, rewards or free upgrades.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

As with most survey research caution should be exercised in generalizing the results. First and foremost, and as indicated earlier, despite the large sample of 108 respondents the subsample of direct hotel bookers was rather limited. Then, since hotels are classified according to different classifications, it is logical to assume that e-bookers might hold different perceptions of different types of hotels. Therefore, findings of this study cannot be generalized since it is only focused on

the luxurious segment. Moreover, it should be emphasized that the subjects of this study were based on the basis of their patronage during a 6-week period at the hotel. As a result, the sample population investigated might not fully represent the hotel's segment. Finally, findings could be subject to bias as 50% of the respondents booked their holiday stay between 6 and 12 weeks before arrival. Therefore it is very likely that they might not have been able to precisely recall their experiences and perceptions at the time of booking.

To generalize the findings of this study, a longitudinal study is suggested as a means to gain a more representative set of the total population. Besides, this study focused on a very specific sample which is defined as actual online bookers seeking for a luxurious experience. As suggested by Swarbrooke and Horner (2007) motivators for guests at five star hotels are clearly different than those seeking for budget hotels. Similarly, Chung and Law (2003) and Law and Cheung (2006) claimed that hotel classification is related to perceived importance on quality. So, it is recommended to conduct similar studies across hotel segments; budget-, midscale-, upscale- and luxurious segments. Moreover, this study has been applied to a Dutch hotel chain which has little or no international brand awareness. Therefore, future research should be applied to international chains with worldwide brand recognition. Finally, considering the relative high percentage of indirect bookers of 82% resulting in a significant loss of profits for the hotel, as well as the fact that 60% of the indirect bookers consulted the hotel's own website prior to confirmation of their hotel stay, it is imperative to gain deeper understanding in the online purchase behavior of hotel guests by applying qualitative research techniques.

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