DISINTERMEDIATION –A THREAT OR OPPORTUNITY FOR TRADITIONAL PAKISTANI TRAVEL AGENCIES –(A CASE STUDY ONTRAVEL MATE)

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Abstract:
The objective of this research is to investigate the effect t of e-commerce on consumer purchase intentions for travel products in the Pakistani Market. It seeks to identify the strategies through which Travel Mate agency can increase its market share by gaining favorable consumer purchase intention for travel services and products. This research further suggests the areas for future research on e-travel buying decisions. The research framework affecting the customer purchase intention for travel services is developed on the basis of past theoretical foundations for online purchase intention of travel products. Quantitative data was collected using purposive sampling and analyzed on PLS3. The research identified e-commerce and disintermediation have a profound effect on consumer purchase intention in the context of Pakistani market. Disintermediation serves as a competitive tool in order to compete in the today's dynamic business climate. This paper explores the outcome of e-commerce on consumer travel purchase intentions by using primary data and testing relationships among the factors in the research model. It further identifies the future areas of research.
Keywords:
E-commerce, disintermediation, web design, purchase intention

1. Introduction

The face of businesses has changed over the past few decades as a result of advancement in Information and communication technologies (ICTs). Internet has given birth to new and improved distribution channels for the travel industry and this caused disintermediation resulting in cost effective value chains(De Backer &Miroudot, 2014). The internet poses both threats and opportunities for the travel industry as it includes benefits such as cost-effective supply networks, customized professional travel packages for the targeted market and pricing transparency(Xiang & Formica, 2007)(Mohapatra, 2013).Chiu, Wang, Fan & Huang (2014) discussed certainissues of

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internet such as price competition, reduce customer loyalty, lack of trust and the perceive risk involve in online transactions. Past literature also supports the idea that the trend of traditional traveling agencies will not fade as they work with professionalism and they provided services of high dependability and reliability. As per a few researchers the traditional traveling agencies have an option to customize package whereas internet does not consequently they trust that the trend will end soon and people will prefer offline agents again which can be considered as a move towards reintermediation (Kracht& Wang, 2010).

Researchers have identified the need to establish strong customer relationship based upon trust, mutual benefits and close collaboration between the companies, their suppliers and customers in order to ensure long term profitability(Kim, Xu & Gupta, 2012). Wen (2012) discussed the importance for the travel services to study the consumer behavior while making online travel purchases and the factors that influence e-travel purchase intentions. The impact of internet, quality of website design and information system design serves as an important factor that might influence consumers online buying decision for travelling purpose(Bukhari, Ghoneim, Dennis &Jamjoom, 2013).

Background

Travel Mate, a travel agency based in Karachi since 2007 has its roots joined with the Al-Khair group which is a renowned Hajj and Umrah organization widely known for managing over 1500 pilgrims each year In Saudi Arabia. While Al-Khair the parent company of Travel Mate operates within the Hajj and Umrah sector, Travel Mate has expanded its service to Ticketing, Umrah, Cruises, Transfers, Tours, Hotels, Visa, and Car Rentals, etc. It has been successful in maintaining a positive image in the market and has received recognition by various authorities associated with the travel trade industry in Pakistan

Being in the service industry the company has to go through extreme measures to stand out from other travel agencies but for the past few years there has been a constant decline in the company's market share and despite various efforts, the company seems to be facing a decline in travelers yearly. The company thinks that the primary reason behind this is the shift of customers to Online Travel Portals. Ever since the introduction of Online Travel Portals also known as Online Travel Agencies, information regarding travel services are easily accessible to direct clients, therefore, limiting the need for an intermediary (Travel Agencies).

The travel agency business depends on intermediary services, acting as a link between suppliers in various countries to clients who do not have access to those suppliers. The internet now has offered direct clients a diverse range in prospects when it comes to travel services hence making it easier to compare prices. Online Travel Agencies naturally do not have similar costs of running operations as compared to travel agencies. Travel agencies tend to have a higher cost of running business operations as they have a higher number of the human workforce and physical office costs involved. Online travel agencies can work on lower markup looking at their costs of business which makes it easier to offer competitive rates.

The reason behind this research is to determine the effects of disintermediation with the rise in online travel agencies on Travel Mate. To what extent does customer behavior play a role in selecting online travel services over offline travel services offered by Travel Agencies. The research also aims to find new ways for Travel Mate to redeem its market share and increase its number of

travelers despite the increase in disintermediation due to travel services being widely available to direct clients online.

Project Research Problem:

In rapidly changing technology and competitive market, it is difficult to hold customers. Consumers are always ready to switch towards new easier approach to take service by cutting out the middlemen which is forming a bad impact on travel agencies sale.

The study will be conducted to investigate the challenges faced by travel Mate due to new trends and patterns in the tourism market.

This research has three main aspects:

- The clear understanding of ecommerce that is impacting on travelling agencies.
- The understanding on buying behavior of their clients after the removal of intermediaries.
- The check how the disintermediation intervenes a positive connection between E-Tourism and Consumer conduct

Purpose of Research:

Development of Travel Mate has been really short in the past years. The purpose of this research is to understand the impact of e commerce on consumer purchase intention towards traveling services. Despite offering high quality services with proper authenticity, having a vast clientele and providing remarkable after sales services there is still a gap between the company and potential clients which needs to be resolved. The goal is to investigate the impact of e- commerce in B2C travel agency market.

Research Questions and Hypothesis:

Is disinter-mediation the cause of purchase intentions shifting from traditional travel agencies to online travel agencies due to the increase of travel services available on E-commerce platforms? Does Disinter-mediation play a mediating role between e-commerce and purchase intention for travelers who use traditional travel agencies for travel services?

Research attempts to do the findings of the following hypothesis:

- H1: E-commerce has an impact on disintermediation, the more travel services are being available through OTA the more traditional agencies are being disintermediated.
- H2: Disintermediation has an impact on purchase intension. The more the disintermediation there is between travel agencies and customers via e-commerce, the more the self-dependent purchase behavior will be when purchasing travel services.
- H3: There is a positive relationship between E-commerce and purchase intention. The more OTA offer services online purchase intention will shift from traditional travel agencies to online travel agencies.
- H4: Disintermediation mediates a positive relationship between E-commerce and purchase intention

Significance of research:

Travel Mate business relies upon as a mediator administration that works as a connection between service providers in different nations to customers. The web presently has offered direct customers a different range in possibilities with regards to travel benefits consequently making it simpler to look at costs. The explanation for this examination is to discover that to what degree client choose on the web travel benefits over traditional travel agencies. The study likewise plans

to discover new ways for Travel Mate to recover its sales in spite of the expansion in disintermediation.

2. Literature Review

Disintermediation:

The term disintermediation was recognized in mid-1960's. The birth if internet-based shopping resulted in elimination of intermediaries due to direct B2C contact (Baxter&King, 1999). Disintermediation refers to the elimination of value chain intermediaries/ third parties caused through electronic channels that enabled consumers to directly interact with suppliers (Wigand, 2020). For the travel and tourism industry, disintermediation refers to removal of tour operators, bus and cruise operators, travel agents, airlines and hotels (Hashim, Ismail, Awang&Safri, 2014). It connects the customers with suppliers and destinations. Managers need to device strategies that can serve as a competitive edge for their businesses in the e-commerce market place (Clarke III, 2008). Disintermediation and e-commerce serve as a threat to the travel agencies and tour operators. In order to survive in this competitive environment, the travel industry must build an online travel services and strategies by gaining the opportunities through ICTs. Abou-Shouk, Megicks& Lim (2013) highlightedthe need to invest in disintermediation strategies by adopting new technologies, hiring experts and forming alliances with tech experts that could give the traditional travel agents an opportunity to learn e-commerce applications.

E-commerce:

E-commerce has made buying more convenient for customers and more competitive for businesses. It has completely changed the way people chose to travel. The advent of internet has increased e-businesses around the globe. E-commerce refers to exchange of value online, secure transfer of product, services and information via internet over a digital infrastructure (Singh, 2019). E-commerce serves as a competitive advantage giving long term success and profitability to businesses in order to serve existing and potential target markets. In today's changing world, the businesses need to rapidly transform from traditional techniques to e-commerce techniques. E-commerce results in the growth of the travel and the tourism industry by providing services through telecommunication systems (Sukthankar, Gaonkar, Gaonkar, & Shirodkar,2020).

High e-service quality is attained customer satisfaction and loyalty in the e-commerce environment. E-service quality is reflected in the quality of the website and it has a great impact on online purchase intention and customer satisfaction (Ahmadian, Haghtalab& Danaee,2017). Value added services such as, location-based services on mobile phones, push base services, agent-based search engines are preferred by e-travelers (Uphaus, Ehlers, & Rau, 2019). Creative design and user-friendly interface help to attain traveler's trust and satisfaction. Digitalization of travel industry requires tremendous change in the ways by which travel agents reach their audience irrespective of their location. They need to provide them competitive prices, packages and services through e-booking systems with feasible online payment options.

E-commerce enables the travel agents to provide various services ranging from family holiday packages to solo travel excursions with the ease of planning, booking and payment through web applications (George, 2021). It also provides customer convenience through access of trust-worthy

customer reviews via online platforms such as Facebook, vlogs and travel forums and websites (Yetimoğlu&Uğurlu, 2020).

Online Travel Agencies

E services facilitate their customers by directly addressing their needs for detailed travelling advise, information and arranging customized trips for both family vacations as well as corporate excursions. Function of travel agencies is to advise about lodging, amenities, transport, attractions and discreet information regarding the journey (Cook, Yale and Marqua, 2006). Reason behind the outperformance of OTA is the 24x7 availability and customer service, however in the last decades personalized dealing at store locations have benefit non-online travel agencies (Syratt and Archer, 2003).

According to literature purchase behavior, length of stay and demography play a role in deciding whether a customer will buy service online or through a traditional agency. Singh, & Ranjan, (2019) concluded their study by indicating that people who travel for a short period prefer online services whereas people who travel for longer period tend to look for services offered through an intermediary. Study also proved that as the income levels increase the higher the tendency to travel abroad increases.

Past literature also supports the idea that the trend of traditional traveling agencies will not fade as they work with professionalism and they provided services of high dependability and reliability. As per a few researchers the traditional traveling agencies have an option to customize package whereas internet does not consequently they trust that the trend will end soon and people will prefer offline agents again which can be considered as a move towards reinter mediation.

Past literature researches the opportunities, trends and challenges of E-commerce on the Indian tourism industry(Kor& More, 2015). They illustrated how the tourism sector played a role in foreign direct investment, generation of employment and economic activity and explained how the industry has been growing for the past years but ever since the information and communication technology era the industry had grown significantly. E-commerce has given an advantage to customers by proving cost effective tariffs, enabling customers to book their entire tours online without the hassle of leaving their desks at home and get detailed information on the products they are mostly interested in.One of the study had chosen members from the Indian Association of Tour Operators as their respondents and concluded that e commerce has a very strong impact on travel industry (Rajasekaran& Tayal,2019).AbhijitMitraetal, (2013) stated that E-commerce is more than just a means to maintain commerce, it is in fact an innovation that is shifting the paradigm of traditional businesses. E commerce has added sales venue through a new online retail industry. Ginanneschi, (2014) presented the outcome of a survey conducted in 2013 on 17 Tuscan hotel, the study showed that the sales driven from OTA sales had become so significant that companies had to rethink their investment choices. This meant that instead of using travel agents as a channel for hotel sales, hotels are rethinking of investing in online channels. This way they can evade the large amount of commissions that's agents require in order to promote sales.

Rajasekaran&Sudarsan, (2018), study concluded that 85% of the operators believed that the ecommerce had increased their business sales, 61% believed that the transaction time was however reduced thanks to the advancement of technology. 61% believed that the advancements
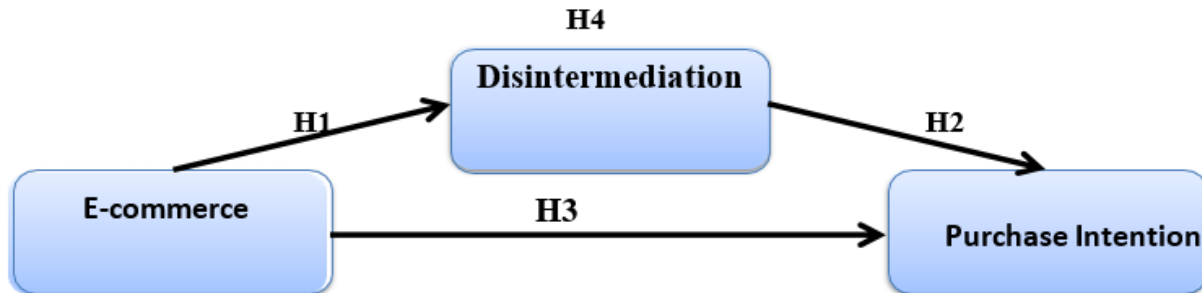
in ecommerce had reduced cost of operations. 53% believed that it provided marketing support. Furthermore, the majority of the sample widely believes that E-commerce has brought about a positive outcome for all touroperators.

Customer Purchase Intention:

Purchase intention is defined as customer's tendency to execute a specific action. It provides an indication as well regarding customer's willingness to perform a certain behavior (Ajzen, 1991). The intention and behavior of customers is their inclination of purchase developed through their attitude and trust towards a particular product or service (Lee, 2015).

Past researchers have identified factors performing a pivotal role in influencing online customer purchase intention. Infomediary and online retailer reputation serves as a major factor in increasing online purchase intention (Chu, Choi, & Song, 2005) along with designing of website, customer service fulfillment and reliability (Kim and Lennon, 2013) in cellphone and apparel industry respectively. In e-commerce settings, Gefen, Karahanna, & Straub (2003);Nilashi, Jannach, bin Ibrahim, Esfahani, & Ahmadi (2016) found a positive relationship between customers' trust and purchase intention as consumer trust plays a role of motivational factor in online purchase intention (Kim, 2020).

With respect to online travel purchases, Wen (2012) identified customer satisfaction, web design and attitude of the travelers as variables influencing online purchase intention. The research is of utmost importance for the success of any online travel agency as intention to purchase is considered as a significant predictor of actual behavior o(Montano and Kasprzyk, 2015).

3. Research Methodology

Quantitative data was gathered using a deductive approach (Reyes,2004).Purposive sampling method was used focusing on the customer purchase intention of experienced travelerswho were at least 18 years of age residing in Karachi city only (Tongco, 2007).Minimum sample size requirements were fulfilled as per the past researches keeping in view the minimum requirements of 5:1 respondent to item ratio(Kotrlik& Higgins,2001). 360 respondents participated in the survey,out of which 12 surveys were un usable due to incomplete data. Data was collected from frequent flyers who have experience of travelling via both traditional travel and online travel agencies.The nature of the research is explanatory. The data collection instrument was adapted from a previous researches.Data collection instrument consist of 2 sections. The first section was about demographic data such as age, gender, education and household income.The second section had questionnaire items related to the dependent and the independent variables. The scale for disintermediation was adapted from a previous research that investigated the effect of

general perception of travelers on disintermediation for travel products and services (Law et al., 2004).The actual instrument for disintermediation was originated from Buhalis (1998). The instrument for measuring the impact of e commerce travel agencies was adapted from a study conducted by Elhaj&Barakeh in the year 2015. There were five items included in this scale and respondents responded using a 5 point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree (coded as 1) to strongly agree (coded as 5). Purchase intention was measured using a 5 items ,5 point Likert scale from a previous study(Mohseni, Jayashree, Rezaei, Kasim, & Okumus,2018). The original scales were developed from past literature(Anderson and Srinivasan, 2003; Kim et al., 2008;Chiu et al., 2009). In this study, online consumers were divided into three categories: infrequent buyers (1–2 times), moderate buyers (3–4 times), and regular buyers (more than 4 times).

Collection and analysis of data

Quantitative data was gathered using an online Google Forms structured questionnaire.Smart PLSwas used to conduct path analysis or structural equation modeling. Also mediation analysis was done using bootstrapping resampling method. Out of 263 responses ,140 were occasional buyers, whereas 50 were moderate travelers and 78 were frequent flyers. The vast majority of responses were male in age group of 28-45.180 male participated in the survey whereas only 83 females responded to the complete survey instrument.62% of the respondents completed atleast intermediate and 43% completed some sort of university education with an average household income of PKR 70,000.

4.Data Analysis and Findings

Hair, Hult, Ringle, and Sarstedt (2017), propose testing validity and construct reliability for internal consistency of measurement models using factor loading, Cronbach alpha, composite reliability, average variance extracted, convergent validity, and discriminant validity. Ideally loading factor levels above 0.7 (Hair, Black Babin, Anderson& Tatham, 2006).All of these values are greater than 0.7 in this investigation. Cronbach's Alpha values of 0.7 or above were recommended by Bakeman and Gottman (1986) for construct reliability, and Fornell and Larcker (2007) proposed composite reliability values of 0.7 and for convergent validity, a minimum average variance extracted value of 0.5 is required.
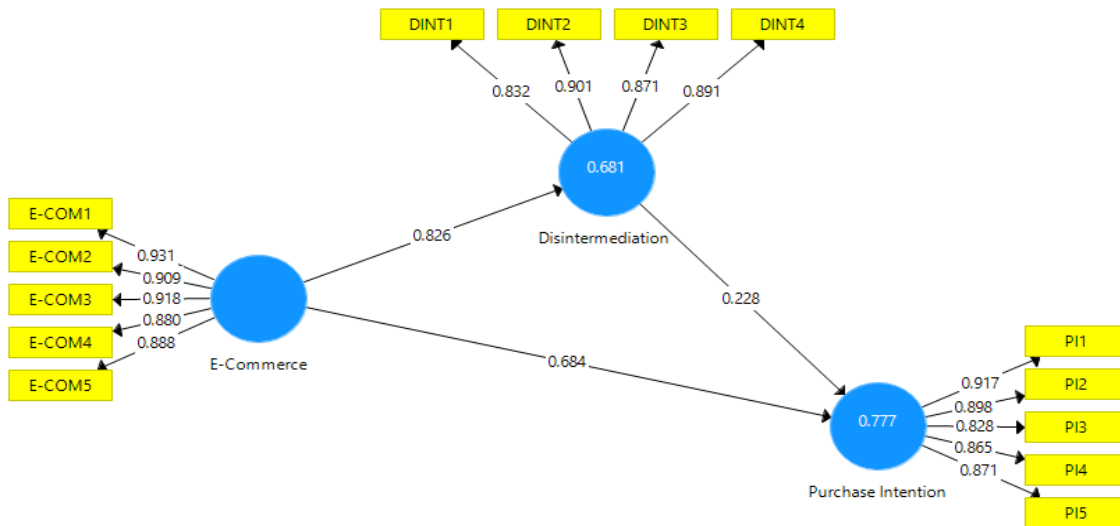
All of the values for convergent validity and reliability provided in the Table 1 below match minimum conditions and satisfy measurement model's internal consistency condition. The Fornell-Larcker measure was used to assess discriminant validity. The square root of the AVE should be bigger than the correlation between the constructs, according to this criterion (Sujati, &Akhyar, 2020, Shakir, et,al. 2020). As the square root of AVE is greater than the correlations in the relevant columns and rows, the measurement model indicated acceptable discriminant validity. According to their calculated parameters in table 2 and Fig. 1, the three constructs of E-Commerce, disintermediation and Purchase intension are acceptable measurements.

Table 1.

	Factor Loading	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)
Purchase Intension		0.924	0.943	0.768
PI1	0.917			
PI2	0.898			
PI3	0.828			
P14	0.865			
PI5	0.871			
Disintermediation		0.897	0.928	0.764
DINT1	0.832			
DINT2	0.901			
DINT3	0.871			
DINT4	0.891			
E- Commerce		0.945	0.958	0.820
E-COM1	0.931			
E-COM2	0.909			
E-COM3	0.918			
E-COM4	0.880			
E-COM5	0.788			

Table 2: Fornell Larcker Criterion

	E- Commerce	Disintermediation	Purchase Intension
E- Commerce			
Disintermediation	0.597	0.874	
Purchase Intension	0.657	0.792	

Analyze the Fit of a Structural Model

The value of R Square is widely used to test the structural model for fitness because it shows the model's expected potency. For a good model, R Square of endogenous latent variables should be more than 0.26. (Shakir et,al., 2021). The R Square values for Disintermediation and Purchase Intention in this study are 0.681 (68%) and 0.777 (77%), respectively, which is good for the structural model's fitness.

Table 3: Coefficient of Determination

	R Square
DIST	0.681
PI	0.777

Furthermore, for structural model fitness, the SRMR standardized root mean square residual value is used. Hu and Bentler (1999) proposed that an acceptable value of SRMR be less than 0.08, This shows a change in the correlation between the model implied and perceived matrices. This study's model has an SRMR value of 0.067, indicating an outstanding match. As a result, the structural and measurement model results indicate that the study's model is suitable for PLS execution.

Table 4: Model Fit Summary

	Saturated Model	Estimated Model
SRMR	0.067	0.067
d_ULS	0.465	0.465
d_G	0.323	0.3723
Chi-Square	674.289	674.289
NFI	0.878	0.878

Hypothesis Testing

The study hypotheses are assessed using bootstrapping methods in PLS-SEM during this phase. All path coefficients have t-values greater than 1.96 (p <0.005), indicating that associations are significant at 97.5 percent confidence level.

Table: 5 Summary of PLS analysis (Hu &Bentler, 1999)

	T Statistics	P Values
E- COM-> DIST	46.807	0.000
DIST -> PI	3.568	0.000
E- COM -> PI	11.047	0.000
E- COM -> DIST -> PI	3.521	0.000

Table: 6 Summary of Hypotheses Assessment (Shakir , 2021)

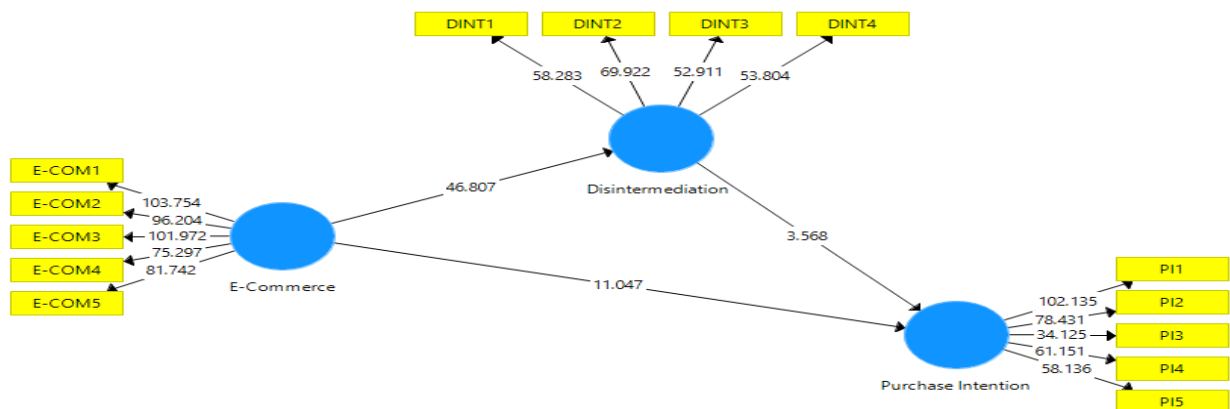| Hypothesis	Results
H1: E-commerce has an impact on disintermediation.	Supported
H2: Disintermediation has an impact on purchase intension.	Supported
H3: E-commerce effects on purchase intention.	Supported
H4:Disintermediation mediates a positive relationship between E-commerce and purchase intention .	Supported

Figure 1: Measurement Model Assessment

5. Conclusion

The advancement of internet resulted in the growth of electroniccommerceserved as the unique selling proposition and the competitive advantage for many business sectors including the travel agencies(Lin, & Fu,2012). The travel agencies need to rapidly transform their strategies from

traditional procedures into e-business strategies involving online travel services so as to target their actual and potential markets (Lam & Cheung,2009). This included conducting business through internet and latest transmission frameworks. The online strategies will result in long term success of the travel agencies by securing their competitive edge.The findings of this research proved that the travel agency under consideration can successfully enhance their sales through disintermediation strategies through the implementation of e commerce services including online booking systems via their websites or mobile applications (Chan, Law, & Ma, 2020). Results proved that online booking and e commerce systems are the essential tools for travel agencies to survive in todays dynamic business environment (Santana,2020).

Several factors such as social factors and trust influence the customer purchase intention for online travel products (Lăzăroiu, Neguriţă, Grecu, Grecu, & Mitran,2020) Customer is more likely to avail the services of a travel agency which offers promotion of travel packages through social media and other internet based platforms .This results in increased customer purchase intentions due to the advantage of low price packages and convenience of buying. Increase in market share of Travel mate is possible by disintermediation strategies as disintermediation has a significant impact on customer satisfaction, new customer acquisition and revenue growth of a company (Wirtz ,2021).

Disintermediation has served as an opportunity for providing customer value through digital infrastructures. Disintermediation provides the benefit to serve the customer with personal customized travel products by maintaining their data.It also serves the benefit of internalization of trade margin (Wirtz ,2021).

Travel agencies must provide personal services such as professional travel advices and packages to their customers in order to survive in the competitive business market.They must consider internet as an opportunity and not a threat to build their customer base.E commerce can serve as a competitive edge for travel agencies by providing business with the opportunity to use their creativity and resources in differentiating their product offerings from others in the market (Capriello&Riboldazzi ,2020). Travel agencies must adopter active strategies and disintermediationmarketing plans in their supply chain networks by hiring experts(Munikrishnan& Al Mamun, 2021). Past researchers have advised traditional travel agencies to adopt certain new strategies such as making an alliance with technological experts as to learn e- commerce strategies for online travel products(Jacobi & Brenner,2018). Another approach is to partner with various technology providers inorder to eliminate the role of intermediaries (such as tour operators) amid the Covid 19 crisis (Vargas, 2020).Elimination of intermediaries will result in cost effective supply chain. E-commerce will allow consumers to connect directly with the destinations and the suppliers (airlines,cruise operators,hotels etc).Disintermediation becomes an important reason of increase in the customer purchase intention of online customer travel products (Del Chiappa& Fotiadis, 2017).In today's competitive world the travel agencies and tour operators must develop their own creative business strategies inorder to survive in the red oceans which is a result of increasing number of travel firms and e commerce.Disintermediation is also viewed as a threat to many travel agencies because it removes all the middle men that are a part of a traditional supply chain for travel agencies (Abdul-Hamid, 2011).As per this research disintermediation serves as a threat to traditional and conventional travel service providers and it can be considered as a great opportunity for agencies that are capable of revising their business models and strategies based on

technology as disintermediation was found to have a significant impact on customer purchase intentions of Pakistani customers.

In the light of the research findings it is concluded that a clear understanding of disintermediation is important for the growth and survival of travel agencies. It is suggested that the coordination of all suppliers in the value chain for travel products by using internet as a distribution channel serves as a competitive advantage for business firms. This paper therefore discusses the importance of disintermediation as an important aspect of gaining favorable customer purchase intention

Recommendations

In any given society, competition will increase with the growth of e commerce as businesses will try to capture consumer's attention through online mechanisms of purchase and delivery. Local travel agents should provide online services to better access remote customer segments (Peña-García et,al. 2020, and Perelygina, Kucukusta, & Law, 2022). Locally sensitive web strategies must be designed by travel agencies in order to grow their business (Ye, Barreda, Okumus, & Nusair,2019). Social network strategies for targeting customers through professional travel packages should be used by Travel mate inorder to increase their market share .From B2C e commerce perspective,the component of responsiveness on EQUAL scale must be researched in context of Pakistani market.Travel mate should develop creative web design in order to serve the Pakistani market .This will serve as a competitive factor in today's dynamic business environment.

Limitations and further studies suggestions

Due to time and monetary constraints, this study was confined to just responders from Karachi city. Moreover, generalization of this research is not possible as data was collected specifically for the strategies used by Travel mate company. Future research must be conducted to investigate the impact of disintermediation and e commerce strategies in all big and small travel agencies in Pakistan.Research must also be conducted tom study the factors that impact disintermediation including the societal factors.Factors such as privacy,trust,price and responsiveness must also be included in the study because they have an impact on customer buying intent.The role of Pakistani government in supporting the tourism industry by the development of e commerce strategies in support of travel agencies must be researched in future.

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