
THE REPRESENTATION OF INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY IN THE OPERATION OF TRAVEL AGENCIES IN THE REPUBLIC OF NORTH MACEDONIA

Biljana Nikolovska

Public Secondary School for Tourism and Catering “Lazar Tanev” - Skopje, Republic of North Macedonia, nikolovska.biljana@yahoo.com

Abstract: The Covid-19 coronavirus pandemic plays a particularly large role in causing changes in people's behaviour in general, especially in their daily habits, which has further caused economic changes. In this regard, a number of sectors in their daily functioning face a number of challenges and suffer losses in the work process, and yet there are sectors that are experiencing financial growth. According to a series of analyses intended for the general population, it can be seen that one of the most endangered sectors from the Covid-19 pandemic is the tourism sector. However, there is some adaptation of certain businesses in this domain, with economic benefits in the field of electronic commerce and online product offerings, i.e., online sales. As for the restaurant and catering sector, according to a study conducted by the Economic Chamber of North Macedonia, Economic Chamber North-West Macedonia, Macedonian Chamber of Information and Communication Technologies - MASIT and the Macedonian Chambers of Commerce, regarding the effects of Covid-19 pandemic, it is pointed out that in the period August-September 2020, there was a mass cancellation of arrangements and there was a drastic decline in the number of tourists expected from abroad in North Macedonia. Moreover, according to official data of the Macedonian e-Commerce Association, it is seen that the citizens of North Macedonia in the first three months of 2020, spent a total of 28.9 million euro online, and only in March 10.1 million euro. This is a significant increase in e-commerce, the first month of the announcement of the pandemic. Thereby, there was an increase of 17.9 million euro (61.5%), compared to the parallel period in the first three months of the previous year. Additionally, based on the attached data, it is seen that e-commerce, in March, grew by 99% compared to March 2019. The purpose of this paper is to provide a clear overview of the current situation with the representation of information technology in the operation of travel agencies in the Republic of North Macedonia. Finally, it is of particular importance to have a direct insight, through the application of empirical data, into how satisfied the tourism managers in the country are, from the aspect of the application of information technology in the work of the travel agencies, with special reference to online payment, online sales, online booking and so forth. More precisely, the important thing is the context of facilitating the process of scheduling travel arrangements and thus achieving greater effectiveness. Regarding the methodological framework, the paper uses qualitative (content analysis method, comparison method, generalization and specification method) and quantitative methods (application of a questionnaire and additionally, descriptive analysis method). Namely, for the purpose of consistent analysis, the research will apply quantitative research framework, conducted within the travel agencies, based on insight into payment preferences of users of their services, as well as customer satisfaction, on the other hand. The main conclusion and recommendations arising from this paper refer to highlighting a significantly higher level of Internet application, more specifically the application and representation of information technology in scheduling travel services and arrangements, especially in the period of the Covid-19 pandemic, in order to prevent direct contact, and to the benefit of greater diligence and fulfilment of the tourist offer and service itself.

Keywords: internet, information technology, online payment, online booking, tourist offer

1. INTRODUCTION

According to official data of the Macedonian e-Commerce Association, it is seen that the citizens of North Macedonia in e-shops in the first three months of 2020, spent a total of 28.9 million euro online, and only in March 10.1 million euro. This is a significant increase in e-commerce, in the first month of the announcement of the pandemic. Thereby, there was an increase of 17.9 million euro (61.5%), compared to the parallel period in the first three months of the previous year. Additionally, based on the data, it is seen that e-commerce, in March, grew by 99% compared to March 2019.

According to the presented analysis, relevant data were obtained that 59.4% of the value of online transactions realized with payment cards issued in North Macedonia remained in the country, while 40.6% of transactions were realized to online merchants abroad.

The websites have accepted the possibility of reorganizing the business, in relation to the existing pandemic with Covid-19. Namely, the highly visited online site grouper.mk, introduced different options for helping the travel agencies, which is especially visited by users. Namely, it is a service that is intended to be used in conditions of

emergency such as the pandemic with Covid-19. Moreover, it is about using modern tools, i.e., a project that is a sublimation of the best of digital marketing and e-commerce for tourist services.

Among other things, in conditions of pandemic and problems in the functioning of the tourism, there are various risks that need to be taken into account. In this regard, it is necessary to follow the recommendations of IATA and other safe and secure certificates in the field of tourism. Also, especially important is web security of the tour operator, as and the SSL certificate (Secure Socket Layer). It is especially important with online payment and when it comes to attracting new and returning customers. In fact, over 90% of travelers look online when researching in preparation for their trips (Tourwriter, 2021).

Additionally, the pandemic emphasizes the importance of applying good principles of sanitation, personal hygiene and established food safety practices to keep the food supply chain secure when it comes to the services of travel agencies. In this regard, effective communication and cooperation between all stakeholders (academia, government, producers, operators, consumers) is needed to prevent hazards and minimize risks. All this is of particular importance for the functioning of the domestic travel agencies, primarily because in a pandemic, people are looking for impeccably safe conditions in terms of visiting places. Namely, in addition to the common information that is shared publicly, each travel agency needs to make sure that its clients are acquainted in detail with the level of compliance with measures and security in their premises. Also, the staff themselves need to be informed and trained for safety measures, as well as on general hygiene practices and disinfection plans (Beck, 2017).

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

In the set of research case, as a result of the complexity of the topic being researched, the process of testing the general hypothesis, but also for a more complete understanding of the phenomenon to be researched, a combined inductive or qualitative research strategy and quantitative research strategy are used - in order to collect both qualitative and quantitative data.

Qualitative methods are used:

1. Method of analysis and synthesis:

1.1. Content analysis of materials:

- Expert analyzes, published in: magazines, mass media, special editions (books, brochures, articles, publications);
- Materials and documents (reports) prepared by Institutes and Research Centers, available to the public (materials such as reports, assessments, recommendations, etc.);
- Materials derived from the Internet (websites, forums, printed texts, reviews, etc.)
- Analysis of professional literature and scientific views.

2. Comparative method

- Comparative analysis, in the context of different views and opinions, but also situations in different social frameworks.

3. Method of generalization and specification (based on all findings, an attempt is made for a general conclusion, in order to emphasize the cultural space where the empirical analysis takes place.

From quantitative methods, the following one is used:

- Survey (survey questionnaire with combined questions of closed type) on a representative sample of a total of 100 respondents, tourism managers, in order to see how satisfied they are with the application of information technology in the operation of travel agencies, with special reference to online payment, online sales, online booking.

3. RESULTS

The empirical research was based on the data obtained from a survey questionnaire, submitted in online communication with the target group. It covered a group of 100 respondents, i.e., tourism managers. The data were summarized on the basis of the answers received from the research and they were selected in order to prove the set hypothesis of the paper. The empirical research was conducted within the period of 10.05. –25.05.2021.

The questions in the survey questionnaire were asked on a Likert scale, in order to see the gradation of the attitude, from negative to positive. The results were presented graphically and then interpreted using the method of descriptive analysis.

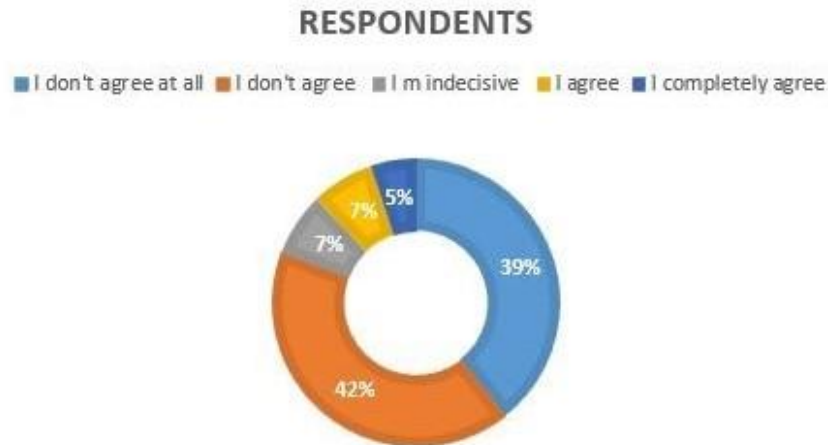
The general hypothesis analyzed and interpreted in this paper is: *"If travel agencies receive financial support from the state in the context of implementing information technology at work, then a higher level of awareness is expected in online booking and payment arrangements."*

The general hypothesis was analyzed and interpreted through the answers to the following questions:

- Question no. 5 "I am satisfied with the package of measures adopted by the Government regarding the assistance of travel agencies in the field of information technology."
- Question no. 9 "There is a high level of payment for online arrangements and booking of travel services, especially in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, which is expected to continue as a trend."

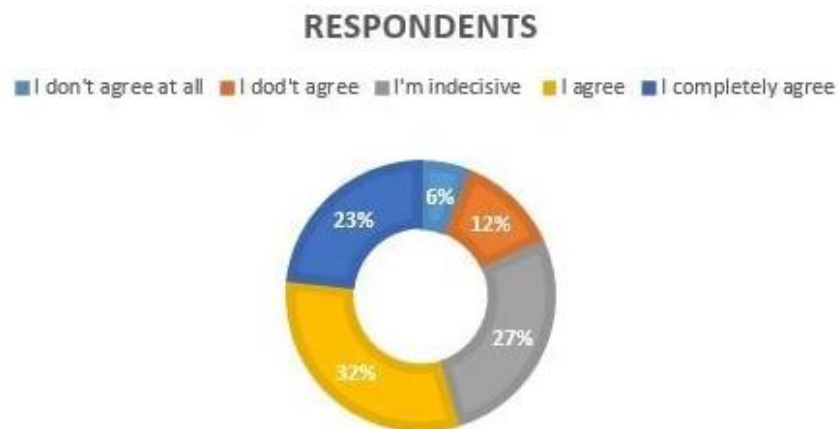
The following data were obtained, based on statistical processing:

Figure 1. Respondents' answers to the question no. 5 "I am satisfied with the package of measures adopted by the Government regarding the assistance of travel agencies in the field of information technology."



Source: Author's own research

Figure 2. Respondents' answers to the question no. 9 "There is a high level of payment for online arrangements and booking of travel services, especially in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, which is expected to continue as a trend."



Source: Author's own research

4. DISCUSSIONS

Modern technical advances in the field of electronics and informatics, and especially the development of Internet and information technologies, have contributed to the development of all activities and thus to the development of operations in the field of tourism services. The technological advantages have revolutionized the way we operate and provide services in the field of finance and have created conditions for travel agencies to offer online payments for their arrangements. In fact, the goal of e-business is to provide efficient customer service regardless of their geographical distance. Developed electronic operations (purchasing, booking) means the ability to provide services anytime, anywhere. In this regard, the classic electronic operations and personal contacts with customers are being replaced by automated service delivery. This increases efficiency, and reduces transaction costs for both the customers and the travel agency. Clients are given greater control over the situation with full insight at all times, but also in conditions of pronounced Covid-19 pandemic, they are provided with a higher level of security (Bogdanović, Šestović, 2012).

According to the obtained data, presented in Figure 1 and Figure 2, the current situation in the country is seen, in relation to the operation of travel agencies, initially in the period of Covid-19 pandemic and then in relation to all the accompanying opportunities for daily use of information technologies. Namely, according to the data provided within Figure 1, as many as 81% of the respondents do not agree with the statement that there is satisfaction with the government measures related to assistance to travel agencies in conditions of Covid-19 pandemic, and especially in terms of incentives. of opportunities for application of information technology.

Furthermore, regarding the possibilities for assessing the level of application of online payment and booking, according to the obtained results, satisfaction is seen among the respondents regarding this condition, especially in conditions of pandemic (55%), which still leaves a space for further elaboration of these potentials.

Electronic payment systems and the application of electronic operations by travel agencies significantly contribute to raising the standard of living of citizens in each society, as well as in the society of the Republic of North Macedonia. Thereby, the payment of transactions electronically, without a visit to the institution that enables the transaction, especially contributed to the facilitation of the way of life and the way of work, both of the institution itself and of the users of the service (David, Roberts, 2015).

What is of particular importance and what needs to be paid attention to by travel agencies that offer opportunities for online payment and booking of arrangements, is to influence the increase of the level of security, i.e., protection of the downloaded data from possible abuses and threats, the personal identity and property of the user (Milosavljević, Misković, 2017). To this end, travel agencies need to work with certified financial institutions and certify themselves for a higher level of security, as well as undertake a number of security mechanisms to remedy the abuses that have occurred (Ivaniš, 2016).

Consequently, risk management needs to be an unavoidable policy of each travel agency, both at the individual level and through cooperation with the state authorities in charge of this issue. Certainly, the legislation, also, has a significant share in a large area in gaining a positive perception of the acceptance of modern technology and way of life by the population in a society (Kallstrom, 2016).

5. CONCLUSIONS

The coronavirus pandemic has greatly affected the changing habits of domestic shoppers, who have shifted much of their online shopping to domestic e-shops instead of foreign countries. If the overall socio-economic and social factors are analyzed, we can say that we witnessed the following: the closure of the borders between the neighboring countries, the impossibility of international travel, as well as the complexity that appeared in the process of purchasing products, especially due to the delay with delivery of products purchased from abroad, but also the fear of ordering products that originate primarily from countries that were with a large number of infected with the Covid-19 virus.

This paper begins with an overview of the existing state aid for the travel agencies, in the frame of use of information technologies, especially on the occasion of the Covid-19 pandemic. Furthermore, the analysis of the existing online opportunities for online booking as well and online payment of the travel arrangements, is approached, especially in terms of their practical application. Also, the existing situation of the need to change the perception in the current way of working is analyzed, in order to take into account a higher level of security, safety certificates and practices in the online working of the travel agencies, in order for the clients to feel more confident and accept the new situation. It is of particular importance that the paper presents an empirical research, in order to analyze and interpret the following thesis, which is proven to be positive, i.e.: *"If travel agencies receive financial support from the state in the context of implementing information technology at work, then a higher level of awareness is expected in online booking and payment arrangements"*.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my gratitude to all those who participate in the empirical part of the research, as well as to the institutions in the Macedonian system that have shared relevant data on the issue.

REFERENCES

- Beck, T., Demirgüç-Kunt, A., Martinez P., C. (2017). *Reaching Out: Access to and Use of Banking Services across countries*, " Journal of Financial Economics
- Basle Committee on Banking Supervision, Bank for International Settlements „*Principles for the management of credit risk*“ (2010)
- Bogdanović, M., Šestović, L. (2012). *Ekonomija od A do Z*. Beograd: Beogradska otvorena škola i dosije
- David E; Roberts S (2015), „*Paying with Plastic: The digital revolution in buying and borrowing*“ (MIT Press)
- Ivaniš, M. (2016). *Osnovi finansija*. Beograd: Fakultet za finansijski menadžment i osiguranje
- Kallstrom, Olle (2016). *Business Solution For Mobile E-Commerce*. Ericsson Review, 2, Retrieved 01-01-2009.
- Milosavljević, M., Misković, V. (2017). *Informacisko tehnolosko delovanje*. Beograd: Univerzitet Singidunum
- Munir, A., B. (2017). *Internet Banking: Law and Practice*. Butterworths Law
- Vlada na RSM. (2021). Ekonomski merki za spravljanje so posledicite od Kovid-19
<https://koronavirus.gov.mk/merki/ekonomski-merki> Retrieved May 25, 2021
- Tourwriter. (2021). HTTPS: Why tour operators need to pay attention to web security.
<https://www.tourwriter.com/travel-software-blog/web-security-for-tour-operators/> Retrieved May 27, 2021
- Anadolu Agency. (2021, February 20). Vlijanieto na Kovid-19 vrz ekonomijata vo regionot: E-trgovijata vo porast, pad na turizmot i ugostitelstvoto. Retrieved February 20
<https://www.aa.com.tr/mk/%D0%B5%D0%BA%D0%BE%D0%BD%D0%BE%D0%BC%D0%>
Retrieved May 24, 2021