

The Role of Product Complexity for Antecedents of Travel Booking on the Internet

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ABSTRACT

The tourism industry has been substantially transformed by online and mobile distribution channels. Consumers increasingly prefer online booking channels over traditional offline channels such as travel agencies. Whereas research largely investigated drivers of consumers' online booking behavior in general, more differentiated analyses of the involved travel products are lacking. The tourism industry is characterized by a large heterogeneity in terms of travel product complexity which ranges from low-complex products such as flights or accommodation to high-complex products such as organized round trips that include a multitude of single travel products consumed together. Extant research on online booking behavior mainly focuses on low-complex travel products. To investigate the role of product complexity in online travel booking behavior, the study develops a research model on antecedents of consumers' online booking intention, applies it to two travel products (airline tickets as a low-complex product and organized circular tours as a high-complex product), and investigates in what respect they differ. The research is grounded in the theory of planned behavior and the Chapman paradigm that draws on the relationship between general and specific consumer attitudes. The research models are tested with data obtained from a quantitative survey based on personal interviews with 122 undergraduate and graduate students in Austria. All involved variables were measured with multi-item scales adapted from literature. Reliability tests (Cronbach alpha, composite reliability, average variance extracted) yielded satisfactory results. The hypotheses were tested by means of partial least squares analysis with SmartPLS software. The results show that in case of the low-complex product convenience, trust, and consumers' general attitude towards online shopping show a positive impact on attitude towards online booking which itself positively impacts intention to book online. Subjective norm, a direct antecedent of behavioral intention in the theory of planned behavior, also shows a significant impact. In contrast, in the case of high-complex travel products, attitude towards online booking is only driven by trust whereas convenience and general attitude towards online booking show no impact. Attitude towards online booking and subjective norm both positively influence intention of online booking behavior. The findings clearly show that the role of antecedences of online booking behavior differs if travel products of varying degrees of complexity are involved. Whereas the research model is fully supported in case of the low-complex product, it is only partially supported for high-complex products. The characteristics of high-complex travel products influence consumers' booking conditions and particularly increase the impact of trust which offsets the impact of convenience and general attitude towards online purchasing. We thus conclude that future research should consider product complexity a possible moderating factor in online booking behavior models.

Keywords: Tourism, online purchasing, product complexity

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