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A Concept on Malaysia's Travel Agency Readiness in Adopting Online Booking Platform

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Abstract

The idea of an integrated booking platform is a venue for all tourism-related services such as booking of air tickets, bus tickets, ferry tickets, accommodations, transfers, tours, entrance fees to tourist attractions, theatre tickets, arts & culture shows, and many more can be done using one platform and at one click. According to a survey done by Tourism Malaysia in April 2020, Survey on Domestic Travel in Malaysia After Movement Control Order (MCO), 13,797 respondents were recorded. It was recorded 58.6% of respondents book their tour packages with Online Travel Agency (OTA). The challenge industry players need to adopt new innovative methods to remain visible in the market and offer a new experience to travelers. The main purpose of this study is to investigate the insight into Malaysia's tourism industry players' readiness toward adopting online booking platforms through the Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology (UTAUT). This study will use non-probability through purposive sampling in which the population is among the travel agencies registered with the Ministry of Tourism, Culture, and Arts (MOTAC) operating in Kuala Lumpur and Selangor. Kuala Lumpur and Selangor travel agencies were chosen because they have superior internet connectivity, are more exposed to changing consumer needs, and are thus more receptive to incorporating technology into their business models. In the practical aspect, this study undoubtedly gives the means to understand industry players' behavior toward I.T.-based marketing platforms and their readiness to shift their minds to stay competitive. This study also identifies their primary concern in adopting an online booking platform to enhance their business market segmentation and ease of managing it, whether the industry players need to be adequately trained in marketing and managing an online booking platform.

Keywords: Online Booking Platform, Customer Readiness, UTAUT

Introduction

According to We Are Social & Hootsuite (2021) in their January 2021 report, there are 27.43 million internet users in Malaysia, which represent 84.2 percent of Malaysia's population, while the number of mobile connections is 39.99 million, which comprises over 122.8 percent from Malaysia population. The year-on-year growth of Malaysia's internet users is 2.8 percent

(January 2020 vs January 2021), representing around 738 thousand users. Users are 77.4 percent from an urban areas with a median age of 30.5 years old. In the same report, 75.8 percent of Malaysian internet users aged 18 to 64 own a laptop or a desktop computer, and 99.2% own a smart mobile phone. 99.1% of internet users aged 18 to 64 have used a conventional search engine in the past month on any device.

Most travel services booking in Malaysia are available on the website (which is a better view on a desktop), catering to specific needs like Catch That Bus (to book bus tickets all over Malaysia), Malaysia Airlines (to book flight tickets and car rental), Air Asia (more comprehensive apps with air tickets, hotel accommodations, nearby eateries, groceries, insurance, entrance tickets to tourist attractions and many more), and OffPeak (dining booking platform). Other means to reach out to travellers are by using social media like Facebook and Instagram apps.

With the COVID-19 pandemic and the on-off implementation of Restricted Movement Control, the Department of Statistics Malaysia announced an increase of 35.5 percent in retail sales online in June 2020 with an increment of 5.8 percent monthly. Standard & Chartered has reported that 73 percent of Malaysians have been comfortable making online purchases since COVID-19 due to contactless transaction applications. The report by We Are Social and Hootsuite in January 2021 recorded 85.3 percent of Malaysian age 15 and above have an account with a financial institution, with 38.8% making online purchases or paying bills online. It is reported that 91.8 percent of Malaysian internet users aged 16 to 64 search online for products or services to purchase. A total of USD2.65 billion was spent on Malaysia's consumer e-commerce in the category of travel, mobility, and accommodation in 2020. But due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the said category recorded a 50.9 percent decline in growth compared to 2019. Malaysians are building their confidence in making digital payments when it is recorded that USD 13.10 million transactions took place in January 2021.

Nowadays, travellers seek a much easier way to cater to their travel needs. According to Ho and Amin (2019), the viewpoint of personalise greatly motivates travellers to use integrated travel websites and apps. In the tourism industry, integration is defined as a situation in which an organization owns multiple components of the distribution process, such as flights, hotels, and travel agencies. Many renowned integrated travel websites, such as Skyscanner, a travel agency based in Edinburgh, Scotland, allow users to research and book travel options for their trip, like flights, hotels, and car rentals. Besides that, another popular website or app is KAYAK, a metasearch engine owned and operated by an online travel agency, Booking Holdings offering services like Skyscanner. As for Southeast Asia, websites and apps such as WEGO, a Singaporean travel metasearch engine, offer users to compare and shop flights and hotels prices and gain popularity. Another tourism-related website and app growing rapidly in Southeast Asia and Australia are Traveloka, an Indonesian unicorn company offering various booking services such as airline tickets, hotel bookings, attraction tickets, car rental, and restaurant vouchers.

When COVID-19 happened, tourism was the most affected industry globally, with 47 percent losses compared to other industries (Andrew J. Wein, 2020). In Malaysia alone, the Ministry of Tourism, Arts & Culture (MOTAC) estimated RM100 billion in losses of income in 2020 (NST, 2020). Various actions have been put in place like allocating space on www.malaysia.travel

website for industry players to promote their products and services for free, creating a digital platform e-Kraf Bazaar to assist Malaysians in selling craft products, and setting up an account MYcraftshopee in Shopee mobile apps to reach out wider market segmentations. These are among initiatives introduced by the government in coaxing Malaysia's businesses to get online, hoping they will have the confidence to enhance their business marketing by developing their website and later apps to sell their products.

In Malaysia, industry players are so comfortable with conventional marketing approaches like attending trade shows, consumer shows, newspaper advertisements, or other electronic mediums to get business. When COVID-19 hit Malaysia's shores in late January 2020, no one in the industry predicted it would affect their businesses tremendously. When the government decided to close our international borders to leisure travelers, all Malaysian industry players were shocked. The situation got worse as time passed, not only in Southeast Asia but the whole world. Through their designated associations, many discussions have taken place with the government requesting aid to keep the business afloat. Travel agents, hotels, and tour bus operators are the most affected industry players.

When the government allows interstate travel, it should give a glimpse of hope, but domestic travelers rely on booking platforms to arrange their travel itinerary using their most trusted gadget, mobile phones. According to a survey done by Tourism Malaysia in April 2020, Survey on Domestic Travel in Malaysia After Movement Control Order (MCO), 13,797 respondents were recorded. It was recorded that 58.6 percent of respondents book their tour packages with Online Travel Agency (OTA). In this survey, most of the respondents came from Selangor (26.8% followed by Kuala Lumpur (10.7%) within the age range of 31-40 years old. Respondents to the survey mentioned they would like to purchase a combo of products/services (65.1%) such as accommodation (90.6%), Food and Beverage (74.4%), activities (65.8%), air tickets (48.5%) and land transport (39.0%). There are a lot of popular mobile apps in travel booking, such as Trivago (a German technology company specializing in Internet-related services and products in the hotel, lodging, and metasearch fields), Booking.com (a Dutch online travel agency for lodging reservations), Traveloka (Indonesian unicorn company that provides airline ticketing and hotel booking services) just to name few. None of which are Malaysian Online Travel Agencies (OTA) or even Malaysian start-ups company.

According to the Nielsen Global Survey of E-Commerce conducted in 2014, comprising 30,000 respondents from 60 nations, Malaysia is in the 6th place of the top market using mobile for online shopping with a total of 47% (Sia et al., 2017). In another survey done by MasterCard Mobile Shopping Survey done in 2014, Malaysia ranked number three behind Taiwan & India with a growth of 20 percent, with contributing factors of the convenience of shopping online using mobile phones (44.8%) and lenience to shopping using mobile apps (46.2%). The survey also discovered that travel services are the most common online item. Malaysians purchase online flight tickets (67%), the highest globally, booking of accommodations and tour reservations at 62%. Malaysian travel agents will easily lose such a potential opportunity, and Ringgit Malaysia will pour out of Malaysia every second if this matter is not taken into hand.

Integrated online booking platforms can be run either by Online Travel Agents (OTAs) or start-ups company so long the sellers on the platform are registered under MOTAC, Ministry of

Local Housing and Government Malaysia, and Ministry of Transport. The idea of an integrated booking platform is a venue for all tourism-related services such as booking of air tickets, bus tickets, ferry tickets, accommodations, transfers, tours, entrance fees to tourism attractions, theater tickets, arts & culture shows, and many more can be done using one platform and at one click. The function should not just limit to making a booking but also be enhanced to a Virtual Reality (VR) tour of the product marketed, the optimization of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in Search Engine Optimization (SEO) to connect to users, and finalizing sales. The challenge industry players need to adopt new innovative methods to remain visible in the market and offer a new experience to travelers. To better recognize the factors that affect the behavior and attitude of Malaysian industry players towards integrated booking platforms, it is crucial to conduct the study. This study will focus on the Malaysian tourism industry players' behaviour in adopting online booking platforms and understanding their slow decision to shift or change their business model according to market demands.

Literature Review

Online Booking Platform

The internet opens possibilities to Small-Medium Enterprises (SMEs) by providing affordable operation and marketing solutions. It enabled SMEs to reach more comprehensive customers, and suppliers than conventional, such as attending business-to-business (B2B) and business-to-customer (B2C) events held only at certain times of the year for certain areas or market segments. Internet adoption, be it in having a website or social media, allows travel agents to reach out and engage with potential customers anytime of the day (Kim, 2006).

According to We Are Social and Hootsuite in their July 2021 report, internet users are 4.4 billion around the globe, comprising 60.9 percent of the world population, recording a growth of 5.7 percent (July 2021 vs. July 2020). The report highlighted that 38.7 percent of internet users aged 16-64 search for places, vacations, and travel online, with 22.8 percent visiting travel websites in the past month.

Online booking offers greater visualization of a travel destination than a conventional illustrated catalog (Bogdanovych et al., 2006). Online booking gives a glimpse of destinations by allowing customers to experience 3D interactive tours, for example, by giving a better impression of the destination marketed. It also assists customers in decision-making by offering curated offerings based on individual interests, behaviors, and personal preferences.

As the internet has affected every area of our lives, it has also altered the tourism industry, where technological advancements have altered the way tourism businesses operate, particularly in how they engage with clients (Meiliana et al., 2017). In addition, many firms invest in technology to help them compete in today's market and grow their revenue (Mengyang et al., 2017; Malaysia Digital Association, 2016). The same scenario can be observed in Malaysia, where the rapid development of the tourism sector is likewise a result of technological advancements and supportive infrastructure (Meiliana et al., 2017; Musa et al., 2016).

Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology (UTAUT)

Research has concluded that individual technology adoption and use decisions in businesses are no longer explainable by UTAUT (Venkatesh et al., 2003), yet UTAUT-based research has

continued to thrive (Venkatesh et al., 2012). UTAUT has been used in research to explore a range of technologies in both organisational and non-organizational settings, alone or in combination with other theories. This sustained increase in interest in UTAUT-based research is partially owing to the development and dissemination of new information technologies (ITs), such as enterprise systems (Sykes, 2015; Sykes, Venkatesh, and Johnson, 2014), collaboration technology in knowledge-intensive enterprises (for example, Brown and Venkatesh 2010), mobile internet for consumers (for example, Venkatesh et al., 2012), and agile information systems (Haas et al. 2012). IT has pervaded practically every element of society, and it is currently used by a variety of people in a variety of situations (Yaacob et al., 2021)

UTAUT has been used to evaluate individual technology acceptance and use in a number of settings by researchers who have used, integrated, and extended it (e.g., different user types, different organisation types, different types of technologies, different tasks, different times, and different locations). To begin, technology users can be divided into three categories: employees, customers, and citizens. For example, Hong et al (2011) used a sample of employees from all levels of a firm (i.e., board directors, senior managers, middle-level managers, and operational personnel). Zhou, Lu, and Wang (2010) employed a sample of mobile service customers (i.e., consumers). Citizens' use of e-government services was investigated by (Venkatesh et al., 2011). Other studies have focused on more particular user groups, such as teachers (Pynoo et al., 2011) and physicians (Pynoo et al., 2011). Chang et al (2007). Second, companies can be classified according to their industry sectors (manufacturing and service industries or private and public organisations). Schools Pynoo et al (2011), hospitals Chang et al (2007), and government institutions Pynoo et al (2011) have all been studied (Gupta et al., 2008). UTAUT can be used to examine several forms of technology. The Internet Gupta et al (2008) has been studied, as well as more particular technologies such as agile IS (Hong et al., 2011), digital-learning settings Pynoo et al (2011), mobile banking Zhou et al (2010), and e-government services (Venkatesh et al., 2011). Other research has concentrated on particular economic sectors, such as services (e.g., Hong et al., 2011), education e.g., Chiu & Wang (2008), food service e.g., Yoo et al (2012), medical services and healthcare e.g., Liang et al (2010), and the public sector (e.g., Dasgupta & Gupta, 2011). In general, research has repeatedly confirmed the robustness of UTAUT and its main effects.

UTAUT has been applied to a variety of organisations, including educational institutions (e.g., universities and schools: El-Gayar & Moran (2007); Liao et al (2004); Pynoo et al (2011), academic societies (e.g., Gruzd, Staves, & Wilk, 2012), government agencies (e.g., Al-Shafi et al., 2009; Alapetite et al., 2009; Chang et al., 2007). These organisations were not only spread over a wide range of economic sectors but also across a wide range of countries and locations, including Asia (e.g., India, Qatar, Taiwan), Europe (Belgium), and the United States of America (USA). Students and instructors, government personnel, and physicians have all been users. Researchers have also looked at a variety of technologies (for example, mobile computing technologies such as Tablet PCs El-Gayar & Moran (2007); Garfield (2005), clinical decision support systems Chang et al (2007), e-government services Al-Shafi et al (2009), digital-learning environments Liao et al (2004); Pynoo et al (2011), and social media (Gruzd et al., 2012). Regarding timing, most UTAUT applications were concerned with the adoption decisions of their users (Azdel et al., 2016).

Considering the study focuses on mobile applications (mobile apps) usage to investigate the determinants of user's behavioural intention (BI) to use mobile apps in marketing their products and services, as stated by (Fadzil, 2017). Varshney and Vetter (2002) mention several classifications of mobile apps, such as mobile entertainment and mobile advertising. The study by Bakar et al (2020) showed that travelers (millennials) were influenced by the cheapest deal always available in integrated booking platforms such as Kayak and Traveloka. The application of mobile apps can optimize specializes in digital precision marketing using predictive analytics based on Big Data available online, such as trends of human behaviour, data sharing on social media, and many more avenue. Marketers need to engage consumers in ongoing conversation in an environment where demand shapes supply, building real relationships and brand loyalty (Digital Marketing Institute, 2016).

Facilitating Conditions

Facilitating conditions refer to the degree to which an organization believes that the existing organizational and technical infrastructure can support the use of technology (Chan et al., 2010). Venkatesh asserted in his study that enabling environments have no effect on behavioural intention but do affect conduct. Potential adopters' existing values, wants, and experiences are considered consistent with innovation.

Performance Expectancy

Performance expectancy, as a variable in the UTAUT model, refers to the organization's perception that utilizing a system would increase job performance (Venkatesh et al., 2003). The phrase performance expectancy (PE) is synonymous with the perceived utility of TAM (PUIt was identified as the strongest predictor of intention and was very significant across all assessment points in the study. The perception is that users must achieve valuable results in work performance, revenue, and promotional campaigns.

Effort Expectancy

Effort expectation is another UTAUT model construct that quantifies the degree of ease connected with using information technology. Venkatesh et al (2003) defined effort expectancy as the ease with which an information system may be used. Users may believe that innovation and new systems require time to become familiar with and completely optimized.

Social Influence

According to Vekatesh et al (2003), social influence is defined as an organization's perception of its relevance in the eyes of other travel agents who are using the new system. It is a significant predictor of both corporate behavioural intention and official influence function. The belief is that implementing a particular innovation will improve an organization's image or prestige among travellers, allowing it to stand out from the competition.

Behavioral Intention To Use

The motivating factors that influence a particular behavior are referred to as behavioral intention, and the stronger the intention to do the behavior, the more likely it will be carried out. Fishbein and Ajzen define intention to use as "the strength of one's intention to engage in a certain behavior" 1975. Emotions experienced by users when using the system impact

their desire to use it again in the future. Positive emotions encourage users to utilize the system again, whereas negative emotions discourage them.

Research Framework

The main purpose of this study is to investigate the insight into Malaysia's tourism industry players' readiness toward the adoption of online booking platforms through the Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology (UTAUT). This primary objective is further supported by four research objectives which are; To examine the influence of facilitating conditions on behavioral intention to use online booking platforms; To assess the influence of performance expectancy on behavioral intention to use online booking platforms; To analyze the influence of effort expectancy on behavioral intention to use online booking platforms; To investigate the influence of social influence on behavioral intention to use online booking platforms. For the purpose of this study, the researcher will apply the UTAUT model as proposed by (Venkatesh et al., 2003). Refer to Figure 1 for the theoretical framework of the study.

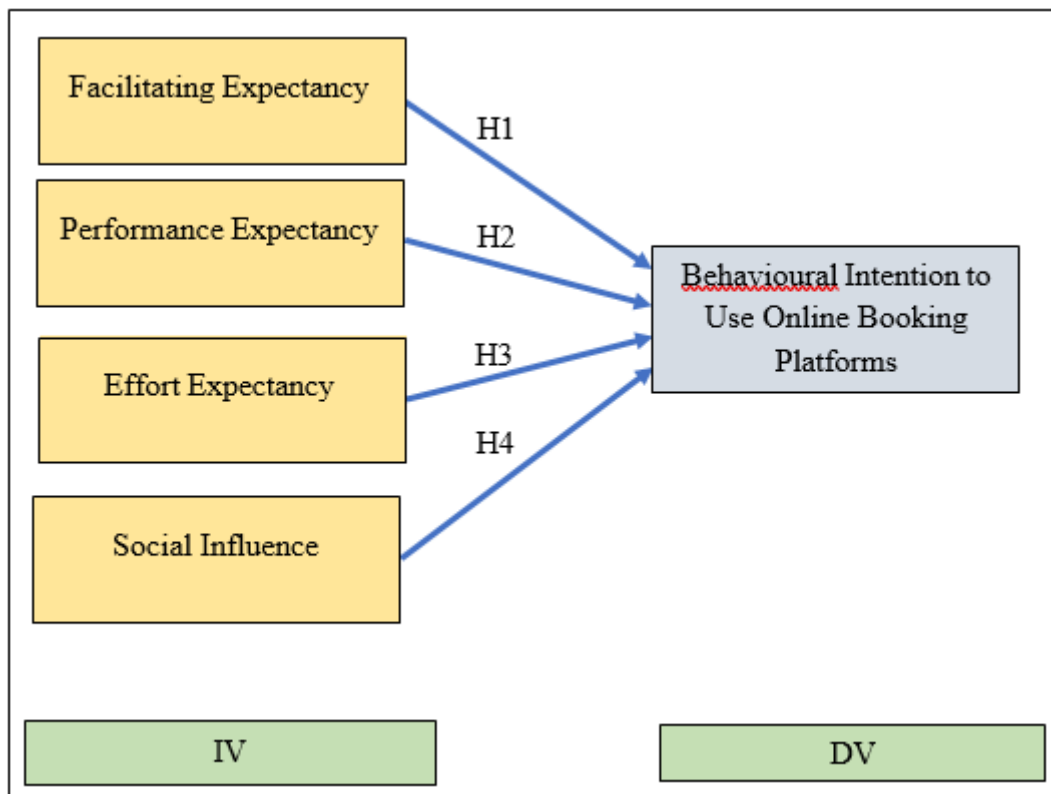


Figure 1: Theoretical framework. Source: UTAUT model (Venkatesh et al., 2003)

Contribution and Conclusion

Numerous studies have been conducted to elucidate the consumer experience with internet adoption, ranging from websites to banking. The criteria that will enable travel agents as participants to transform their business models by integrating their business operations into an online booking platform have yet to be determined. Some assumptions contribute to the components, but none have been verified thus far. The study also ascertained Malaysian travel agents' reliance on government initiatives for new markets and marketing techniques. As a result, this study will undoubtedly contribute to a better understanding of the extent to which Malaysian travel agents require government support to aid them in their operations.

Researchers and academicians will hopefully be able further to investigate the issue in a new study environment now that they are aware of it.

In a practical aspect of the study, it hopes to understand industry players' behavior toward IT-based marketing platforms and their readiness to shift their minds to stay competitive. The study would like to identify their primary concern in adopting an integrated booking platform to enhance their business market segmentation and ease of managing it. This study will address if they need to be properly trained in marketing and managing an integrated booking platform. This study will also offer new data on organizational behaviors toward innovation or new technology. Since there are scarce studies on mobile applications, especially in the tourism industry, this study will provide useful information on the factors contributing to the intention to use mobile applications, especially for the hotels' third-party mobile applications. This data will be helpful to not only for the industry for also for future research.

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