



Advantages and Disadvantages of Traditional Travel Agencies Vs. Online Travel Agencies

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Abstract

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<p>This study investigates the advantages and disadvantages of traditional and online travel agencies while also determining the booking preferences of the Maltese population. Its purpose is to provide insights into the evolving trends of the travel industry. To this end, a literature review was conducted to obtain information from previous studies on the topic and set the study's theoretical grounding. The researcher also obtained data by conducting both interviews and questionnaires, employing a mixed-method approach. The interviews delved into the service providers' perspectives while the questionnaires considered the travellers' perspectives. Overall, this study's findings indicate a shift towards online travel agencies among Maltese travellers driven by various factors. However, this may not necessarily lead to the disintermediation of traditional travel agencies, as they still offer distinct advantages over online travel agencies. The study also established the advantages and disadvantages of both types of agencies, which meet the needs and preferences of different travellers. In conclusion, this study indicates that both online and traditional travel agencies are important intermediaries in the travel industry and should continue to adapt and improve according to travellers' evolving demands. The implications of these findings are that travel agencies, should focus on better understanding the preferences of their clientele, which is crucial for them to remain relevant and competitive while travellers should consider all the factors beyond pricing when booking through a travel agency.</p>	
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Declaration of Authenticity



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Declaration:

I hereby declare that this research study is based on the outcome of my own research. I, as the author, declare that this research study is my own composition which has not been previously produced for any other qualification.

The research study was conducted under the supervision of Ms. Fiorentina Darmania Jochimsen

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1. Introduction

This study focuses on the relationship between traditional travel agencies (TTAs) and online travel agencies (OTAs). This introductory chapter provides background information on the evolution and significance of travel agencies. Moreover, the research aims and objectives will also be discussed while outlining the research methods, material, and structure.

1.1 Research Background

The tourism sector is built around booking channels such as traditional travel agencies, online travel agencies, and suppliers' booking platforms in general (Seocanac, et al., 2019). Travel agencies have been acknowledged as the most popular tourism intermediary. They are organisations that make travel arrangements for travellers, including booking flights, accommodation, and transfers as well as other extra amenities such as travel insurance and vehicle rental (Camilleri, 2018; Collins English Dictionary, 2023). Travel Agencies establish a site which can be either physical or online where potential clients can access information about various tourism products. Travel agents offer travelling advice, facilitate booking services, assist with travel formalities, issue tickets and plan itineraries. (Camilleri, 2018.) In simple words, a travel agency serves as a liaison between travel industry providers and customers who require their services. (Jedin & Annathurai, 2020.) Without such booking channels, tourists encounter many more difficulties in finding and paying for the necessary travel services (Seocanac, et al., 2019). Due to the internet's involvement in people's lives, such intermediaries have evolved, and OTAs have been introduced (Jedin & Annathurai, 2020).

Nowadays, most businesses, use the internet as a tool to reach out to a global audience, thus making it a truly global media. As a result, consumer internet usage within the context of the travel industry, has seen a significant expansion. Aamir, et al. (2023) and Abrate, et al. (2020) contend that compared to using a TTA, the internet offers potential travellers access to abundant information, faster responses, and frequently lower prices. On the contrary, Munikrishnan and Mamun (2021) contend that TTAs offer superior customer service that is more individualised than that provided over the internet. This can be seen particularly through how TTAs help clients with complex travel arrangements, respond to inquiries, resolve any issues that may arise, and build relationships with potential travellers. Additionally, it is believed that TTAs save travellers a lot of time when making travel arrangements. Moreover, the unbiased counsel they offer also enhances the value of travel for consumers. (Jedin & Annathurai, 2020.)

1.2 History of Travel Agencies

Travel agencies, previously known as retail travel agencies, can be traced back to the mid-1800s. They initially started out by aiding in group customer travel arrangements. Primarily this occurred through the selling of train tickets, which could be bought in bulk at a lesser price. From there, they also started to offer accommodation arrangements; however, these were sold separately. The potential for packaged tours was sought out later when travel agents began to understand how they could facilitate international travel. By the late 19th century, two participants in the travel industry emerged – the tour operator and the travel agent. (Leslie & Holland, 2018.)

Tour operators organise packaged holidays which include transportation to and from the destination, accommodation, as well as transfers and activities at the destination. (Leslie & Holland, 2018.) Meanwhile, as tourism started to rise, the requirement for intermediaries to assist in meeting travellers' needs became quite evident. As a result, travel agencies were created. Their job is to act as the middle person who deals with the supply and demand of tourism. (Seocanac, et al., 2019.) Tour operators could also sell packaged holidays to potential travellers through travel agencies (Leslie & Holland, 2018).

The gradual introduction of internet and technology within the travel industry ultimately led to the creation of OTAs. As a result, the travel industry, including TTAs, is facing challenges within this changing and unpredictable business environment. This is mainly due to the technological advancement and increased competition that have arisen following the introduction of OTAs. Indeed, customers are always expecting and seeking innovative products and services. Consequently, travel intermediaries, both OTAs and TTAs, must live up to such expectations to satisfy their customers' needs. Overall, the introduction of OTAs has significantly impacted the way travel operations are conducted. (Aamir, et al., 2023.)

1.3 Research Aim and Objectives

The aim of this study is to investigate the advantages and disadvantages of TTAs in comparison to OTAs, while also determining the preferred travel agency type among Maltese travellers. To achieve this aim, specific objectives have been outlined namely, to define and identify the characteristics of TTAs and OTAs to obtain a clear understanding of both agency models. To this end, a review and analysis of the existing literature on the advantages and disadvantages of both travel agency models will be conducted and data will be gathered. This will provide a view of the

strengths and weaknesses of each travel agency, which is crucial for travel agents. Another objective is to investigate the travel agency preferences for Maltese travellers. To this end, the factors that could influence the customer's choice between booking through a TTA or an OTA will be identified and literature to gain insights on the customer's decision-making process will be reviewed. The researcher intends to obtain such information by collecting data from the local population, focusing on travellers aged 40 – 70 years. Focusing on this age cohort fills a gap in the existing literature by concentrating on a demographic that may have distinct needs and preferences. By fulfilling these objectives, it is hoped that this study will contribute to our understanding of the dynamics between TTAs and OTAs, particularly within the context of Malta.

1.4 Research Methods, Material and Structure

The research methods process begins with a literature review that analyses the current literature on TTAs and OTAs that focuses on their respective advantages and disadvantages. Moreover, both qualitative and quantitative data were gathered. The material utilised for data collection were interviews and questionnaires. Interviews were conducted with the service providers and questionnaires with the customers. The data gathered are then analysed and triangulated with the literature review to generate a discussion. Throughout this study, referencing was carried out using the Harvard-Anglia 2008 version provided in Word.

This introductory chapter is followed by a literature review structured into sections concerning the customers' decision-making process, OTAs, and TTAs. Next, the Methodology chapter examines the research process in depth. The rationale behind the chosen research and why it was deemed ideal to conduct interviews and questionnaires. It also describes how the results obtained were triangulated with the information evaluated in the literature review. The study's ethical considerations and limitations are also discussed in this chapter. In the Results, Analysis, and Discussion chapter, the findings obtained from the interviews and questionnaires are presented. The findings are then analysed and triangulated with the literature to generate a discussion. Lastly, the study is concluded with some final arguments and a conclusion to this whether the research aims have been obtained. Some recommendations for future research are also provided.

2. Literature Review

The purpose of this literature review is to present existing research related to this study's main objectives, namely identifying and explaining the distinctive roles and characteristics of TTAs and OTAs. Analysing such attributes, should highlight the relevance of such agencies in the travel industry. This review also intends to compare and contrast TTAs and OTAs with the aim of identifying their respective advantages and disadvantages. Additionally, the advantages and disadvantages of both TTAs and OTAs are further discussed from a customer's perspective, with the aim of determining which agency potential travellers prefer booking through and why.

2.1 Customers' Decision-Making Process

This section explores potential travellers' decision-making process while planning and booking travel-related products and services, focusing on the objective which examines the factors that could influence the decisions taken. Developing a better understanding of such factors could help one understand travellers' thought process when deciding whether to book through a TTA or OTA.

When booking travel-related products and services, certain decisions have to be made, such as which destination to visit, where to stay, and what to do. Understanding how such decisions are made could help one identify what potential travellers look for in a travel product. The decision-making process may vary from one person to another, especially since factors such as brand loyalty, consumer behaviour, and age may influence their decisions (Chia, 2018). On the contrary, Liao (2020) argues that it is the value of a product or service that drives people to choose one product over the other, implying that one's preference for TTAs or OTAs stems from their inherent value.

Choosing a destination is frequently a complex process since different travellers have diverse preferences and needs. These may vary depending on what type of holiday the travellers are looking for. For instance, for a business trip, one may look for a quiet hotel located close to their workspace whilst for a family holiday, one may look for a hotel with a swimming pool and a play area. Furthermore, knowing that payment for the trip needs to be made in advance makes the process somewhat more challenging (Acop, et al., 2020). This is because travellers will need to trust their travel agency. If people are unsure about the agency chosen or their products, they may hesitate to pay. One typically goes through a three-phase process prior to making a decision, moving from the initial awareness of the various options available to a more focused consideration

of specific options until a decision is reached. The awareness stage encompasses all the options that are available to the customer and which the latter is aware of, including all the destinations that one could possibly visit, and the numerous travel products or services that are available. Meanwhile, in the consideration stage the customer identifies which specific options are worth considering. To make their final decision, the customer continues to gather information while refining their choices. When seeking information, most customers undergo two different phases of consideration as they develop and assess their attitude towards the different options. These phases constitute utilitarian consideration and hedonic consideration. Generally, verbal information such as an explanation of the services offered, meets one's utilitarian information needs, whilst pictorial information such as images of the destination and the hotel, meets the hedonic information needs. This process has been used to explain people's behaviours when gathering information, planning a holiday and forming perceptions about destinations. (Park, et al., 2019.)

That said, Park, et al. (2019) claim that customers do not always follow a step-by-step approach to reach their final decision. Indeed, when they are making a routine purchase or have loyalty to a brand, individuals tend to avoid every step and reach their final decision straight away. This is because familiarity with a product adds confidence and steers one's focus towards particular brands. Nowadays, using the internet to seek potential destinations further streamlines the decision-making process since it provides access to information and allows travellers to conduct detailed research (Briez, et al., 2021).

Meanwhile, when making online purchases, customers tend to base their decisions on their attitudes and perceptions of websites, focusing on aspects like the security and trust of the online service providers. For this reason, ease of use is a main factor in the online booking process. Moreover, time efficiency, easy price comparison, and the website's appearance may also influence the customer's decision. (Park, et al., 2019.) If a decision was made impulsively, one might feel as if they failed to execute the decision-making process effectively. To alleviate their sense of guilt, many people tend to blame the negative outcomes of their decisions on the website, even if the website did not have anything to do with the negative outcomes. This is done as people find it easier to blame OTAs for their own hasty decisions rather than admitting their mistake of not doing thorough research. Indeed, OTAs are often the main point of resentment for customers undergoing post-purchase regret arising from impulsive decisions. Regrettably, this leads to diminished trust in the agency used, leading people to switch to different agencies. To ensure that

any purchases done through their websites have been carefully considered, many OTAs offer the option of free cancellation. This allows users to make revocable decisions. (Jo, et al., 2022.)

Overall, the decision-making process is influenced by numerous factors. The act of making impulsive decisions, added a psychological dimension to the decision-making process. Travel agencies need to have adequate marketing in place so that potential travellers are made aware of their services during the awareness stage.

2.2 Traditional Travel Agencies

This section intends to define and characterise TTAs, which have always been known as the trusted intermediaries between travellers and their destinations. They play a crucial role in enhancing travel experiences. Despite the considerable technological advancements that took place, which impacted the travel industry, TTAs continue to offer unique expertise through face-to-face interactions. This section aims to meet the objective of defining and characterising TTAs.

TTAs in Malta include companies like Britannia Tours, Rocs Travel, SMS Mondial, and Compass Travel which sell both ready-made and individualised packages to travellers. TTAs were very successful and dominated the travel industry because to travel or obtain information on travel services, customers had no choice but to visit a TTA (Aamir, et al., 2023). Nowadays, however, travellers do not necessarily have to visit a TTA to make travel arrangements. Indeed, the uptake and use of technology have accelerated the disintermediation of TTAs (Munikrishnan & Mamun, 2021).

The rise of the digital era has imposed certain challenges on the TTAs; consumers now have the ability to independently organise and book their holidays, thus bypassing TTAs. On the other hand, OTAs can also provide travellers with tailor-made packages, which could potentially displace those offered by TTAs. (Abrate, et al., 2020; Munikrishnan & Mamun, 2021.) Due to these circumstances, the role of a travel agent operating a TTA is becoming quite challenging. TTAs must be able to carry out tasks more effectively to remain viable (Seocanac, et al., 2019). To this end, over the past decade, TTAs have started to utilise technology with the aim of remaining competitive. When TTAs combine their specialised knowledge with new technologies, they can offer new goods and services, thus adding more value for travellers. (Munikrishnan & Mamun, 2021.)

Technology has brought great changes to the tourism industry, leading to the disintermediation of some TTAs and the development of new products and services. Munikrishnan and Mamun (2021) in fact, argue that TTAs need to reaffirm their role if they are to withstand disintermediation and remain competitive in the tourism industry. This can be done by introducing new value propositions, such as incorporating internet activities to uphold close client relationships, consistently delivering high-quality services, having extensive product knowledge, and cultivating niche markets. Furthermore, TTAs must take action by realising their advantages over OTAs, rethinking their conventional roles, and adopting new business models (Munikrishnan & Mamun, 2021).

Apart from utilising technology, many businesses, including TTAs use social media platforms as a marketing tool. Social media platforms, such as Facebook have introduced features allowing travellers to book instantly or directly through messaging the agencies. Some TTAs are making use of such features to bring their business closer to potential travellers. (Angeloni & Rossi, 2021.) Additionally, Briez, et al. (2021) agree that TTAs can utilise social media platforms to build credibility, enhance customer service, and gain insight into their customers' preferences. That said, TTAs' shift towards digital platforms varies across different cultures, countries, and travel agents depending on the norms and preferences that the individuals have (Aamir, et al., 2023). However, social media has impacted the tourism intermediary sector by affecting the customer's decision-making process (Splendiani, et al., 2023). Indeed, numerous destinations face struggles when using social media as their online visibility is quite basic since many TTAs refrain from using social media platforms to their full potential (Briez, et al., 2021; Splendiani, et al., 2023).

Travel agencies have always been a crucial component in the development of the travel industry. However, their role is becoming considerably more challenging with each advancement within the online travel industry. Some argue that TTAs are gradually losing their relevance as OTAs can offer many more services while meeting travellers' needs more effectively.

2.2.1 Advantages and Disadvantages of Booking with a Traditional Travel Agency

This section aims to meet the objective of analysing the advantages and disadvantages of TTAs. TTAs appeal to individuals seeking in-person interactions, expertise and knowledge, and possibly financial benefits. However, as is revealed in this section, TTAs are facing certain difficulties particularly in today's culture, which values convenience and quick access.

There are many benefits to utilising TTAs as intermediaries when seeking travel services. According to researchers Munikrishnan & Mamun (2021), the most crucial factors that influence a customer's decision to book with a particular TTA are efficiency, expertise, individualised service, and access to information while also keeping in mind hidden costs. Additional research has further revealed that the main benefits of booking with TTAs include the staff's knowledge and expertise, the travel agent's dependability, time saved, personal counselling, special offers, and social interactions (Seocanac, et al., 2019). Liao (2020) adds another point by mentioning how customers often book through a TTA for the value of the experience. Since a holiday is a new experience, customers tend to exercise a value judgement prior to booking and at the moment of booking. This involves customers assessing their interactions with the travel agency prior to their holiday. Such assessments significantly influence the traveller's overall perception of value.

One advantage that TTAs have over OTAs is that they can offer face-to-face interactions. Face-to-face services help reduce the risk of payment security issues and scamming, which are dangers associated with planning and booking a trip online. (Munikrishnan & Mamun, 2021.) Liao (2020) supports this notion and highlights that TTAs excel in interactions between the customer and the employee. Additionally, TTAs tend to consistently deliver better-quality services than OTAs thus helping customers by facilitating their decision-making process (Liao, 2020; Munikrishnan & Mamun, 2021). Face-to-face interactions are valued by some travellers as personal interactions like body language, ease the conversation and avoid any issues associated with online communication.

Another advantage of using TTAs is that they offer advocacy. If a problem, such as flight cancellation, arises before or during a holiday, the travel agent will swiftly assist the affected travellers in resolving the situation. (Whitmore, 2019.) Moreover, when booking through a TTA, customers may contact the agency and ask for assistance, as TTAs have a direct customer approach. However, since TTAs are physical businesses, customers may only be able to ask for assistance during office opening hours unless the agency provides them with an emergency number.

The absence of planning may seem like an advantage to some but a major drawback to others. Booking through a TTA means that the traveller will not be the one planning the holiday. However, whilst some travellers prefer to let others plan everything for them, others enjoy the planning

aspect of the travel experience, including conducting their own research, obtaining as much information as possible, and viewing photos of the destination. (Whitmore, 2019.)

Booking through a TTA may also prove cheaper than using an OTA, primarily because the average customer does not have access to the special rates that are negotiated with travel agents from the suppliers (Talwar, et al., 2020). TTAs cooperate with their suppliers which allows them to obtain better deals for their customers (Liao, 2020). Secondly, travel agencies have means to get around airline reservation systems that may appear to be sold out. Thirdly, travellers may be caught off-guard if OTAs fail to publicise special fares that may be restricted with blackout dates or cancellation policies. TTAs may use this to their advantage as they can be more forward with their customers on such information. (Talwar, et al., 2020.) Additionally, TTAs provide their customers with valuable but lesser-known information like the necessity of obtaining a visa or hidden travel costs, such as visa fees. Such expenses must be considered as part of the travel package (Abrate, et al., 2020). Lastly, holidays requiring multiple stopovers often carry exorbitantly high prices when offered by OTAs, as the latter tend to put together such holidays using multiple one-way tickets, which tend to cost more than round-trip tickets (Talwar, et al., 2020). Through their booking systems, TTAs have the advantage of booking one connecting ticket. This is not only cost saving but also notifies the airlines of travellers' connecting flight. Conversely, purchasing multiple one-way tickets to reach the final destination, requires travellers to undergo check-in and security checks for each segment. Moreover, TTAs play a crucial role in assisting budget-conscious individuals with maximising their travel experience as they can provide their customers with exclusive travel deals since they would be well-informed about such offers (Abrate, et al., 2020). Despite all the effort by the TTAs, OTA customers are more advantageous on promotional offers (Talwar, et al., 2020).

Meanwhile, one disadvantage TTAs are faced with is related to the use of marketing. TTAs normally rely on traditional marketing strategies to promote their services in order to attract new customers whilst also retaining current ones. Such methods include brochures, flyers, word of mouth, television and radio adverts, and attendance at travel fairs or expositions. (Acop, et al., 2020.) TTAs put a lot of effort into providing illustrated brochures; these give potential customers a great deal of information accompanied by aesthetically pleasing images and travel advice, and readers generally find them attractive (Acop, et al., 2020; Savina, et al., 2022). However, to utilise traditional marketing strategies can be costly and time consuming. Nonetheless, TTAs find it challenging to compete with OTAs' websites as these can prove to be more appealing to potential customers, especially with new tools like virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR). Through

such tools, immersive experiences are offered, and the interactive visuals can potentially inspire the customers to visit such destinations. However, according to Acop, et al. (2020), referrals and word of mouth are successful traditional marketing methods for TTAs as people who experienced satisfactory service from the TTA, encourage their friends and family to experience the same. Meanwhile, Kyomba, et al. (2022) acknowledge that TTAs offer fewer options when compared to OTAs, as normally their services are all listed in a brochure. From the researcher's perspective, this encourages travellers, especially those who frequently book with the agency, to skim through the brochure with a keen eye for 'anything new'. This behaviour is typical since many of the destinations offered by TTAs tend to remain constant over the years.

As stated, TTAs come with the disadvantage that customers must physically visit or contact the agency themselves during the latter's opening hours. This means that only customers located in the same country and in close proximity to the business can visit the offices and book through the agency. This may lead to some issues. Firstly, potential customers are constrained by the agency's opening hours and cannot contact them at their own convenience. This means that when it comes to planning the holiday, someone else's timetable has to be taken into account. (Kyomba, et al., 2022; Whitmore, 2019.) In addition, to visit the agency, especially in Malta, one has to take into consideration traffic and parking challenges. In addition to this, travel agencies must operate within the constraints of their surroundings and adapt to any environmental changes that may occur. This includes not only any changes that occur in the country in which they are based, but also in other destinations included in their packages. (Whitmore, 2019.) An example of this occurrence was during the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. TTAs needed to be aware of their local restrictions as well as the destination's restrictions. Therefore, TTAs need to go the extra mile to ensure that their clients are satisfied with their service and will rebook through them (Whitmore, 2019). This is because TTAs can only reach a limited number of potential clients, so it's very important that such clients are retained.

If travel agencies wish to grow and succeed, they need to be aware of both domestic and international market trends as well as possible business prospects in other destinations. (Leslie, D. and Holland, J., 2018.) Unfortunately, however, many TTAs have stuck to providing traditional services like hotel and flight bookings. Moreover, a growing number of travellers are relying increasingly less on TTAs when it comes to finding inspiration and obtaining information about their upcoming holidays, they can easily obtain all the information they desire online (Briez, et al., 2021). Overall, despite the range of valuable benefits they offer to travellers, TTAs also face a number of challenges, most of which came as a result of technological advancements.

2.3 Online Travel Agencies

The objective of this section is to define and characterise OTAs which are companies that allow travellers to book travel arrangements through their websites. Such companies include Booking.com, Expedia.com, and Kayak.com.

OTAs are operated by third-party distributors employing either an agent model or a merchant model. When the agent model is adopted, the business working with the OTA collects the payment from the traveller and, in turn, pays the agency a commission fee. This fee often depends on the supplier's brand awareness as, for example, large hotel chains often have lower commission fees than smaller hotels (Kyomba, et al., 2022). On the other hand, OTAs following the merchant model, collect the retail price from the traveller, and then the agency pays any businesses involved the wholesale price. (Angeloni & Rossi, 2021; Huang Yin, et al., 2019.) OTAs can increase the demand for suppliers working within the tourism industry; thus, by working with OTAs, suppliers, such as hotels or airlines, ensure that they stay competitive in the market (Kyomba, et al., 2022).

The internet is transforming how business is conducted within the travel industry (Aamir, et al., 2023; Kumar & Chauhan, 2023). This shift to e-commerce added tremendous value to the travel industry and revolutionised the way travellers book their holidays. Indeed, travellers make up the main user demographic for search engines, often using meta-search engines like Skyscanner. Moreover, the emergence of OTAs has transformed the landscape of the travel industry. OTAs have become a one-stop shop for travellers worldwide; through one platform, users can locate airfares and book hotels with the simple click of a mouse. Moreover, OTAs present their customers with a concise overview concerning their preferred destination, along with images, pricing, and information of what is being offered. (Huang, et al., 2022.) Thus, as indicated by Munikrishnan and Mamun (2021), potential travellers can bypass TTAs through online communication and accessibility.

OTAs have emerged as the prominent intermediaries in the tourism market (Park, et al., 2019). This statement is made evident by the substantial growth in the online travel sector in Europe which reached a value of \$72 billion in 2021 (GlobalData, 2022). Considerable profit of the online expenditure is generated from airline tickets, car rentals, and hotel reservations. However, the accommodation sector saw the largest growth, establishing OTAs as one of the most successful businesses in e-commerce as many customers utilise OTAs to book their accommodation (Angeloni & Rossi, 2021; Huang, et al., 2022). OTAs have transformed the tourism sector, making

it more convenient and flexible, and fuelled the industry's expansion as they encouraged investments in the tourism industry (Ampountolas & Chiffer, 2022).

As stated, OTAs integrate flights, accommodation, car rental, and/or attraction reservation systems on one platform, directly offering travel-related products or services to potential travellers. Airlines and accommodation companies have begun partnering with OTA platforms to enable travellers to search for comparable products and services. Through partnering with OTAs, companies can allocate their products and services to the right customer at the right time. Such services can be further enhanced by analysing booking patterns and past performances, forecasting future demand, and examining marketing trends. OTA applications can gather such information, allowing service providers to offer tailored travel information that caters to potential travellers' unique needs. (Huang, et al., 2022.)

Overall, the impact of the internet on the travel industry is undeniable. Digital platforms, like those adopted by OTAs, have reshaped the dynamics between the service providers and potential travellers, improving the connection between the two. Moreover, in offering everything on one platform, they have facilitated the process through which travellers seek information, exchange experiences, and buy travel products. Additionally, OTAs have contributed to the increased transparency and accessibility of travel-related information, paired with unmatched convenience. (Park, et al., 2019.)

2.3.1 Advantages and Disadvantages of Booking with an Online Travel Agency

OTA platforms have become very popular with individuals looking for travel options and booking services (Chia, 2018). Indeed, nowadays, potential travellers have an assortment of options to choose from as OTAs have broadened their services to include niche travel markets and unconventional services, including home-stays, wedding tours, and private jet expeditions (Huang, et al., 2022). Given their popularity, one must consider the advantages and disadvantages of using OTAs. The purpose of this section is to identify the advantages and disadvantages that OTAs face hence meeting the objective of analysing the advantages and disadvantages of OTAs.

Angeloni and Rossi (2021), and Briez, et al. (2021), state that the information available online is predominantly free, easily accessible at any time, and can easily be shared. The authors, in fact, agree that OTAs are successful partly because they offer free travel information which can attract potential customers while assisting them in their decision-making process. How customers

perceive the quality of the information given on the OTA's website concerning the services provided is an important variable that could influence one's decisions. The significance of such information provided is yet another important factor. Park, et al. (2019) found that travellers tend to prefer purchasing products from websites that provide them with substantial information and allow them to assess the quality of the product through images and customer reviews. On the contrary, Chia (2018) states that the significance of the information provided depends on factors like consumer behaviours and consumer characteristics.

OTAs operate under distinct principles; their main features include the ability to access them at anytime and anywhere, having everything on one platform, and being able to use advanced search functions (Huang, et al., 2022). However, for customers to be satisfied with an OTA, they must be able to use such functions. Indeed, potential travellers must be somewhat familiar with the internet to be able to plan their own holiday online. Therefore, a traveller's lack of expertise or familiarity with the internet is a key obstacle that many businesses in e-commerce are faced with. User-friendliness is a main quality of OTAs. Indeed, if a website is easy to use, then travellers are more likely to access and utilise it. This means that online reservation platforms must be practical and simple to use since they are accessed by users with different levels of technological expertise. On this note, in the researcher's opinion, older generations are becoming more familiar with technology, meaning that OTAs can reach an even wider audience. Customers' perceptions of the convenience offered by a particular website also have a considerable impact on whether or not they are satisfied with an OTA. (Park, et al., 2019.) The researcher plans to sustain these statements by collecting data on the matter.

Well-designed websites can successfully act as effective marketing, highlighting the perceived quality of the business and its services. Pairing user-friendly functionality with valuable, and reliable information can further attract customers to the website. Indeed, for businesses to safeguard their reputation and encourage repeat business, providing accurate information is fundamental. (Park, et al., 2019; Kotronoulas, et al., 2023.) Such benefits increase when business websites include multiple images of the destination and what is offered as images meet the hedonic information needs and are more engaging than text. OTAs must keep in mind that it is essential for travellers to obtain information from reliable and trustworthy travel agencies when planning a trip (Vyas, 2019). If the information provided by an OTA matches the service provided, customers are far more likely to rebook through its website (Huang, et al., 2022).

People will not blindly trust OTAs. They will need to thoroughly view what is being offered to them and gradually, the individuals will start trusting the OTAs. The trust-building process is aligned with the additional 3Ps framework, which includes physical appearance, process, and people. Physical appearance refers to having a visually appealing website that contributes to a positive first impression. Meanwhile, the process component involves the methods used to deliver relevant and supportive services to customers, leading to increased satisfaction. Lastly, by people, the framework refers to the attitude and behaviour of the OTA's employees and the customers accessing the website. (Elci, et al., 2017.)

Another advantage of OTAs is that travellers are offered transparency. When using OTAs, travellers can compare the numerous available options based on the reviews shared by previous travellers who had visited or used the products or services offered by the businesses. Many customers base their decisions on such reviews, as many believe that online reviews are more impartial than the available promotional content. For this reason, potential travellers rely on OTAs as a dependable and transparent channel through which they can assess the quality of the affiliated business. This is mostly done through the reviews that customers can leave on the OTA websites. On the other hand, OTAs can use this as an effective and convenient method to boost their sales and overall product. (Angeloni & Rossi, 2021).

Potential travellers' purchase decisions are greatly affected by price, this being one of the main factors that drive consumers to make online purchases. Many users prioritise price over other aspects; thus, most of the OTAs allow users to organise their search results by price, making it easier for customers to compare the prices between different agencies (Kyomba, et al., 2022). Since different websites offer a variety of prices, some customers invest a lot of time in trying to find the best and most affordable prices and services. Customers evaluate the difference in prices between, for example, the hotel website and the OTA as it may be cheaper to book through the hotel website than through the OTA or vice versa, thus obtaining more information about the market. (Jedin & Annathurai, 2020.) Meanwhile, if not enough research is conducted, travellers may feel as if there is a better option which they cannot seem to find, choosing to wait for better deals instead. Once the booking is finally complete, some might still question whether they made the right decision (McCabe & Branco Illodo, 2019). Naturally, this process intensifies the pricing competition, thus enhancing market efficiency. Indeed, as a result of the increased price competition, price variability amongst the offerings is reduced. However, through their study, Huang, et al. (2022) still found some variation between the airfares provided by airline companies and OTAs for the same type of ticket suggesting that disparities in prices still remain. Such

disparities can be due to various reasons such as search expenses, and commissions (Huang, et al., 2022). Munikrishnan and Mamun (2021), point out how OTAs can charge lower prices than TTAs since they offer online bookings, allowing individuals to arrange their own holidays while minimising transaction costs since the booking, confirmation, and payment processes are automated

A disadvantage faced by OTAs, is security. Security is an issue for both internet buyers and browsers. When making an online purchase, customers are especially concerned about credit card security. Thus, travellers perceive TTAs to be more secure than OTAs. In addition to this, the abundance of OTAs may create an uncertainty barrier, particularly for new users, especially when it comes to determining if the website is trustworthy and secure, and whether the prices and itineraries found are the most dependable, affordable, and practical. It must be noted that customer's perceptions of security vary across different age groups as certain age groups tend to be more cautious than others. (Talwar, et al., 2020.)

Meanwhile, one disadvantage of booking through OTAs is that if a problem arises, the only way to contact assistance personnel would be through email, online chats with chatbots, or customer service agents, if they are available (Whitmore, 2019). Although chatbots are available all the time, they can only assist travellers with a list of predetermined questions. Thus, customers may face a longer response time (Zlatanov & Popesku, 2019). Moreover, OTAs cover a larger geographic location since anyone from anywhere around the world can access their website and book through them. This means that a client is easily replaceable, and complaints would not be as harmful as they can be for a TTA.

Hence, it may be concluded that using the services of OTAs has its advantages and disadvantages. OTAs have the primary advantage of offering convenience. However, such convenience is also accompanied by certain drawbacks such as lack of human interaction and dependability on efficient websites.

2.4 Conclusion

Overall, the literature review chapter explored the existing literature that is related to TTAs and OTAs. Through peer-reviewed literature and academic sources, this chapter has provided a fundamental grasp of the key concepts surrounding the topic. The literature review has highlighted the evolution of travel agencies in a competitive travel sector. Both agencies have been studied

with emphasis on their advantages and disadvantages. Ultimately, customers must decide between the individualised service offered by TTAs and the convenience offered by OTAs depending on their preferences and needs. However, both TTAs and OTAs are integral components of the travel industry.

In the following chapter, the methodology used for this study will be explained. The chapter begins with an explanation of the research methodology approaches and then identifies the research methods chosen for this study. The researcher provides an explanation of the data collection methods and why such methods have been chosen. Moreover, the results from the pilot study will be presented, alongside the ethical considerations which were followed, and the limitations which were encountered.

3. Methodology

The research methodology includes the research approach and the methods chosen to address the research questions, aims, and objectives. Indeed, this Methodology chapter provides an overview of the research design, data collection techniques, and strategies utilised to conduct this study. It also discusses the limitations that were faced throughout the selected research approach and method, and the ethical considerations that were taken into account. This chapter also describes the methods used to ensure that the study yields good quality findings while guaranteeing transparency throughout the research process.

3.1 Understanding Research Methodology

Researchers must collect data to conduct a study. Prior to initiating their study, researchers should determine whether they need to collect primary data, which are new and original data gathered for the first time by the researcher themselves, or secondary data, which would have already been gathered by other researchers for their own studies. Various data collection methods can be used to collect primary data, such as observations, interviews, and questionnaires. Meanwhile, secondary data, can be obtained through published or unpublished sources. (Mazhar, et al., 2021.)

For this study, the researcher opted to conduct her own research, thus focusing on primary data collection. The researcher opted for primary instead of secondary data collection to obtain original insights and perspectives from Maltese travellers. Nonetheless, secondary data was still conducted for the literature review chapter of this study. The fact that few studies related to travel agencies had been conducted in Malta inspired the researcher to explore this topic in detail.

3.1.1 Research Methods

Studies may involve numerical measurements, descriptive approaches, or a blend of both. Thus, to generate the data required and obtain useful results, the appropriate research method should be selected based on the study's requirements. The quantitative, qualitative, and mixed research methods are the three most frequently used methods among researchers. (Taherdoost, 2022).

The quantitative research method is preferred for studies based on numerical data. The objective of quantitative research studies is to establish the relationship between variable within a population

(Kotronoulas, et al., 2023; Mehrad & Zangeneh, 2019; Taherdoost, 2022). The collected data are generally put in a form in order to analyse the different variables using statistics and easily understand numerical data gathered from the population (Kotronoulas, et al., 2023). Such studies may adopt either a descriptive or an experimental design. Descriptive studies aim to establish the relationship between variables whilst experimental studies seek to establish causation (Mehrad & Zangeneh, 2019; Taherdoost, 2022). Typically, the results obtained by quantitative studies address specific questions like “what percentage” or “how many” (Taherdoost, 2022). Although quantitative research adopts unbiased metrics and solutions, it restricts the study and increases the chances of oversimplification by focusing only on numbers (Geremew, et al., 2023). Moreover, Kotronoulas, et al. (2023) note that since complete certainty is unattainable, statistics do not prove assertions; instead they quantify the level of certainty or uncertainty, implying that the entire research process is based on a probabilistic basis. Quantitative data can be collected using a variety of methods such as surveys; however, the instruments used must be validated and designed to offer precise measurements. (Taherdoost, 2022.)

Meanwhile, non-quantitative research typically falls under the residual category of qualitative research, which represents everything that is not based on numbers (Aspers & Corte, 2019). Qualitative data analysis involves examining and interpreting written information to understand the dimensions of its meaning (Mezmir, 2020). Qualitative research includes various data collection methods, like interviews or observations, that aim to provide a holistic understanding of the subject. Qualitative studies focus on exploring and understanding the complexity and importance that individuals attribute to a set of meanings, motivations, social processes, and personal experiences. (Aspers & Corte, 2019.) When analysing qualitative data, researchers tend to adopt various analytical methods, such as creating a detailed summary of the data (descriptive analysis) or interpreting the data (thematic analysis) (Mezmir, 2020). Nevertheless, all qualitative approaches have two common characteristics: they focus on real-life situations and analyse such matters in all of their complexity (Mehrad & Zangeneh, 2019). Through their study, Aspers and Corte (2019) found that qualitative data are often perceived as more subject to interpretation than quantitative data, thus making them more prone to biases since words are inherently less accurate than numerals. However, the authors contend that there are cases where non-numerical research yields more dependable outcomes than quantitative data such as when understanding human behaviour and experiences, especially when the researchers adhere to the principles of scientific inference. Similarly, Mehrad and Zangeneh (2019) argue that rigorous, structures, and systematic qualitative research often provides an alternative to quantitative studies.

Lastly, the mixed-method approach combines both qualitative and quantitative data collection methods. Utilising a combination of both methods assists researchers in addressing complex research challenges, such as researching topics with multiple factors and variables or researching context-specific factors, by offering insight into a variety of situations that may be too complex to fully comprehend with a single data collection method (Dawadi, et al., 2021; Geremew, et al., 2023; Taherdoost, 2022). Additionally, the mixed-method approach helps extrapolate research results for the entire population. For instance, while quantitative methods gather data from a large number of participants, thus making it easier to generalise findings, qualitative methods prioritise the participant's perspectives, allowing researchers to obtain a more profound understanding of the issue under study. Indeed, quantitative data provide breadth to a study, whilst qualitative data provide depth. (Dawadi, et al., 2021.) By combining the advantages of both approaches, certain limitations can be avoided as the weakness of each research method is compensated by the other (Dawadi, et al., 2021; Taherdoost, 2022). Dawadi, et al. (2021) add that the qualitative and quantitative data obtained can also be triangulated with other sources or methods. Data triangulation is a research approach that increases the validity and reliability of the research findings by using multiple sources or methods to obtain a thorough understanding of the topic under study (Vivek, 2023). Nevertheless, Geremew, et al. (2023) argue that although the mixed-method approach is a more balanced research method, the triangulation involved may yield contradictory results.

The mixed-method approach was considered the most appropriate for this study as the researcher believed that it would provide a deep understanding of the research topic from diverse perspectives. Moreover, the insights aimed to be obtained could not be fully understood by adopting the qualitative or quantitative approach alone; none of them would have answered the research questions in a holistic manner. The qualitative aspect of this study included the interviews while questionnaires collected both quantitative and qualitative data. Overall, the mixed-method approach allowed the researcher to mitigate the limitations associated with the qualitative and quantitative approaches while maximising the depth, breadth, and comprehensiveness of the research findings, thereby providing a more nuanced understanding of the topic.

3.2 Data Collection Methods

The researcher chose to carry out a combination of interviews and questionnaires. Interviews allow the interviewer (the researcher) and the interviewee (the respondent) to talk directly, with the interviewer asking questions and the interviewee giving their responses (Mazhar, et al., 2021).

Interviews can be structured, semi-structured, or unstructured. Structured interviews involve a prepared list of questions paired with standardised recording procedures such as written notes, audio recording, or videotaping. Moreover, interviewers conducting structured interviews are to adhere to protocols, ensuring that the required documents and materials are available. On the contrary, unstructured interviews do not involve any predetermined questions or standardised procedures. Lastly, semi-structured interviews consist of predetermined open-ended questions, allowing the interviewer and interviewee to hold a discussion and allows for discussion on similar topics that may also be relevant for the study. (Mazhar, et al., 2021; Taherdoost, 2022.) Additionally, the participants may discuss their opinion in their own words, reducing the input of the interviewer. Since structured interviews are made up of close-ended questions, respondents are only able to express their opinions in limited ways. Moreover, additional information cannot be brought up during structured interviews, and the respondents cannot elaborate on their responses. Meanwhile, without any predetermined questions, an interviewer cannot compare the responses gathered through all the interviews for a thorough analysis. (Taherdoost, 2022.) To minimise the influence of personal biases and ensure consistency throughout the interviews, whilst obtaining personal feedback from the participants, the researcher opted for semi-structured interviews for this study.

Semi-structured interviews were carried out with the managers or directors of TTAs in Malta so as to discuss the agencies' position in relation to OTAs. Through this method, an in-depth understanding of TTAs and their advantages and disadvantages over OTAs was expected to be obtained. Managers or directors were chosen instead of travel agents since they are the ones who work behind the scenes. Although they are not always in direct contact with customers, they are the people who can truly give an overview of how OTAs affect their business or the challenges or opportunities they encounter on a daily basis. The questions created for the interviews (refer to appendix 3 and 5), which were drafted after conducting the literature review, were based on this study's objectives. Potential interviewees were contacted via email or phone and asked to participate in this research study. The interview process began by emailing potential interviewees on the 21st of February 2024 and the last interview was conducted on the 15th of March 2024.

Questionnaires were also distributed for this study. Questionnaires comprise a list of predetermined questions and are suitable for gathering information from people who are dispersed across different regions or who are difficult to contact in person (Mazhar, et al., 2021). For this study, the researcher wanted to gather information about TTAs and OTAs from the travellers themselves. Hence, questionnaires were ideal, given their ability to gather data from a large

number of sources. The questionnaires were filled out by Maltese travellers who had utilised the services of both TTAs and OTAs. The questions were carefully curated to allow them to provide their feedback on the matter, so that the researcher could determine what they consider to be advantages or disadvantages when booking through a TTA or OTA. As aforementioned, the questionnaires distributed were both qualitative and quantitative in nature (refer to appendix 1 and 4) as some questions were structured as multiple-choice, allowing the researcher to calculate percentages, thus providing quantitative results. Meanwhile, other questions were open-ended which allowed the respondents to express their preferences, thus providing qualitative results. The questionnaires were distributed to the general public through social media, targeting travellers aged 40 – 70 years, as it is believed that such individuals would have had multiple travel experiences since they would have had more time to travel. Moreover, this age cohort may have different needs and preferences compared to younger demographics. The questionnaires were distributed in February, and it took a month and a half to obtain the required amount of responses.

Through these data collection methods, information was gathered from both the service providers and the consumers of the travel industry. Furthermore, the chosen research methods proved ideal for triangulating the data collected and gaining a deep understanding of the research topic, ultimately fulfilling the study's aims and objectives. Other data collection methods were excluded; conducting focus groups or observations, for example, would have been impractical for this study. Indeed, focus groups require multiple participants to gather together at the same time and at the same location, which would have been difficult to organise, especially since the target population was quite vast. Moreover, the researcher would not have been able to explore individual perspectives through focus groups. On the other hand, observations would not have been feasible since this would have required the researcher to observe an individual whilst going through their booking process. Moreover, observing booking behaviours in specific settings would have required the researcher to dedicate considerable time and resources to the process.

3.3 Methods of Analysis

The methods of analysis chosen for this research are content analysis for the qualitative aspect and descriptive analysis for the quantitative aspect.

Content analysis is a useful technique for analysing open-ended questions (Taherdoost, 2022). The basis of content analysis is that text serves as a rich source of data, holding significant potential for uncovering valuable information about specific phenomenon. It involves

systematically grouping text into categories based on the participant and the content thereby facilitating the identification of commonalities, differences, patterns, and underlying associations, both explicit and implicit in the text. (Kleinheksel, et al., 2020.) The researcher chose to conduct content analysis since it can provide a nuanced and comprehensive understanding of the research topic while ensuring consistency by providing a structured and systematic framework. Apart from this, content analysis can also be effective for quantitative data. Other qualitative data analysis methods include thematic and narrative analysis, which the researcher excluded. Narrative analysis is ideal for studies based on story telling, which was not the case for this study. On the other hand, thematic analysis, which focuses more on investigating underlying themes, is more suitable for exploring experiences or emotions.

Meanwhile descriptive analysis provides a summary of the data gathered. The summary would normally include the frequency or percentage of the variables being measured. The variables can easily be represented by tables or graphs to condense information in a visually appealing and easily understood manner. (Kotronoulas, et al., 2023.) The researcher opted to analyse the quantitative data using descriptive analysis in order to obtain a concise overview of the data and their characteristics. By conducting descriptive analysis, the researcher was able to identify any patterns within the data that ultimately helped answer the research questions. Moreover, the researcher was able to easily compare the data obtained by presenting them in graphs and tables. Other quantitative data analysis methods, such as experimental analysis and inferential analysis, were not considered suitable for this study as they dealt with elements which do not feature in this study. Experimental analysis is ideal for testing hypotheses, whilst inferential analysis is used to forecast future outcomes based on the gathered data, making it ideal for drawing conclusions based on the acquired information.

3.4 Pilot Study

A pilot study was conducted prior to initiating the data collection process to assess the efficiency of the research tools. Upon formulating the questionnaire, the researcher noticed a deficiency as if respondents listed that they did not utilise the services of TTAs or OTAs, the questionnaire would still continue asking questions about them. For this reason, modifications had to be made to ensure that the questionnaire continued to be filled in only by respondents who utilised the services of both TTAs and OTAs. Initially, respondents were asked whether they used OTAs, TTAs or both. If the respondents indicated that they had not utilised the services of TTAs nor

OTAs, the questionnaire was to be terminated accordingly. On the other hand, the interview pilot study indicated that no amendments were necessary.

3.5 Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations are essential to ensure that the study is carried out responsibly and in a respectful manner. For this reason, prior to conducting this study, ethical approval was obtained from the institute's ethics committee. Overall, this study was conducted with honesty and integrity. Consent forms explaining the nature of the study and what it entailed were given to participants prior to the interviews. The researcher also obtained confirmation from the participants that the information provided could be used in this study. Moreover, participation in this study was not enforced and respondents participated voluntarily. Throughout the whole process, the participants were treated with respect, and they had the right to withdraw from the study at any time without consequences. Additionally, confidentiality was valued throughout the research process. To this end, the distributed questionnaires were anonymous, and the information obtained through the interviews was protected.

3.6 Limitations

Despite careful execution, certain limitations were unavoidable. Being immersed in a particular industry can shape one's perspectives, beliefs, and attitudes, and this would influence the research process and outcomes of any study. The fact that, at the time of writing, the researcher had worked in a TTA for more than three years, in fact, brought with it a notable limitation due to personal biases. Although the researcher's experience provided valuable insights into the topic under study, it also made it challenging for her to take into account different viewpoints. Indeed, the researcher's familiarity with the operations of TTAs could have predisposed her to interpret the study's findings in a manner that aligns with her beliefs or experiences. To overcome this limitation, the researcher used methodological techniques that helped reduce the influence of personal biases.

The researcher recognised the importance of maintaining a balanced perspective on the travel industry and thus tried to investigate the intricacies of both TTAs and OTAs. That said, this brought with another limitation. During the secondary data collection phase, while attempting to access relevant and recent literature related to TTAs, the researcher noticed how recent studies predominantly concentrated on OTAs rather than TTAs. Just as how the industry is shifting

towards digitalisation, researchers have also shifted towards exploring the expanding sector of OTAs. This issue posed challenges in finding recent literature on the advantages and disadvantages of TTAs. This exposed the researcher to the risk of exploring antiquated information or ignoring any emerging trends within the TTA industry.

Another limitation that emerged during the data collection phase was the difficulty of obtaining feedback from OTAs. The researcher also wanted to conduct interviews with OTA managers or directors, but since such agencies are worldwide and it is not possible to visit their offices, the researcher was not able to do so. The researcher also encountered difficulties when trying to schedule the interviews with the TTAs, as few were replying to the researcher's emails. This led the researcher to call the TTAs and ask to schedule an interview over the phone.

The final limitation was related to the challenge of ensuring that the feedback received from those respondents who had utilised the services of both TTAs and OTAs was unbiased. Furthermore, although the researcher distributed the questionnaires on social media platforms and pages tailored for travellers in order to reach the appropriate population, the researcher still encountered difficulties in securing a sufficient number of respondents. Moreover, out of the 239 responses obtained, only 104 utilised both services and 62 of which were in the chosen age group. More respondents could have been reached through alternative methods, such as additional platforms or channels; however, time constraints prevented the researcher from pursuing these options.

3.7 Conclusion

To conclude, this Methodology chapter explained how this study was carried out and why was conducted using interviews and questionnaires. The researcher took care to select a methodology that allowed this study to fulfil its overall objectives: to comprehend the dynamics between TTAs and OTAs based on the viewpoints of both service providers and customers; determine the booking preference of the Maltese travellers; and investigate which factors may influence the traveller's preferred travel agency. Despite its strengths, the chosen methodology also brought with it a number of limitations; however, the researcher made sure to guarantee the validity, reliability, and ethical integrity of the whole research process.

In the following chapter, the researcher will present the results obtained through the interviews and the questionnaire which were conducted. The chapter will analyse the insights gathered from the interviews conducted, allowing for a deeper understanding of the characteristics of TTAs, the

benefits of TTAs, and their impact from OTAs. Moreover, the chapter will analyse the responses obtained from the questionnaire and explore the frequency and themes that emerge from the respondents' answers. This will provide an understanding of the preferences of the respondents. Overall, this chapter will contribute to a better understanding of the dynamics between the service providers and customers.

4. Results, Analysis and Discussion

This chapter examines the data collected through the interviews and questionnaires. It first presents the findings in a structured manner, followed by an analysis and discussion to interpret these results. The data obtained are triangulated with the literature review findings in order to provide a more in-depth understanding of the advantages and disadvantages of OTAs and TTAs as well as the factors which influence potential travellers' choices when booking.

4.1 Interview Results

The researcher conducted three interviews with managing directors and managers of TTAs based in Malta. The interviews focused on determining the advantages and disadvantages of TTAs and OTAs in order to ultimately meet this study's aims.

The three participating TTAs operated in distinct markets; thus, they provided different perspectives to this study. Participant A represented a TTA that catered mostly to individual travellers, and their main focus was long-haul holidays. Meanwhile, Participant B represented a TTA that catered mainly to group travellers, creating pre-made itineraries for their customers to choose from. They served individual travellers as well. Whilst Participant C, too, represented a TTA that catered for group travellers; however, they also had a clientele base in corporate travel.

In the following chapters, the interview results will be presented. The next chapter will focus on the evolving role of the travel agent.

4.1.1 The Role of a Travel Agent

Participants A and C discussed the evolving role of the travel agent within the changing dynamics of TTAs. Participant A mentioned how modern travel agents are facing increasing work demands compared to previous years. This participant mentioned how, in previous years, travel agents had boundaries between their professional and personal lives. However, nowadays, due to the current workload and customer expectations, maintaining such boundaries has become challenging. Similarly, Participant C stated that throughout their years of operating, they have built a loyal client base. As a result, they are compelled to exert more effort into catering to such clients in order to offer them new experiences and meet their evolving preferences and expectations.

The following questions were related to defining the advantages that TTAs have over OTAs both from the interviewees' perspective and from that of their customers'.

4.1.2 The Advantages of TTAs

When asked about the advantages of TTAs, all three interviewees emphasised the significance and advantage of face-to-face interaction. When booking through a TTA, customers have the opportunity to physically visit the agency, engage in discussions about their travel plans, seek advice, and receive tailored suggestions. Participant A also stated that with the fast-paced life that many people are living, customers are realising that planning an itinerary takes a lot of time and research, especially when it comes to finding out information that may not be so obvious such as visa requirements. In such scenarios, the TTA can provide the customer with first-hand information. Moreover, the participants indicated that when booking through a TTA, customers benefit from both a personalised service and the travel agents' experience. The participants emphasised the importance of getting to know the customers and understanding their preferences and needs to offer them a suitable holiday. They also noted that customers may not always be certain about their travel desires, and after consulting with the travel agent, they might realise that their initial plan may not have been the most fitting for them. As Participant C (2024) observed, "Sometimes they don't even know what they want or where they want to go, so you can give them ideas. It's not like they have to go in and buy whatever it is online. Most of the time they want custom-made arrangements which we can deal with." On the contrary, when booking through an OTA, customers have to research the destinations on their own. Moreover, they cannot negotiate matters with the agency.

Another benefit which the participants mentioned is the enhanced sense of security that a customer has when booking through a TTA. To begin with, customers who book through a TTA are aware of which agent is handling their booking, which is not always the case with OTAs. The interviewees also pointed out that TTAs offer immediate assistance and support, especially in case of emergencies, which is often lacking in OTAs. Indeed, they added that when booking through OTAs, customers often interact with unknown entities, and in emergencies, the agency offers lack of support. Customers are often left to rely on online chatbots or general helpline numbers, which can be irritating. In contrast, when booking through a TTA, customers can directly contact their agent through a simple phone call, ensuring immediate responses without the need to wait for emails.

The next question focused on the impact of OTAs on TTAs which asked the participants whether OTAs have affected their respective TTAs.

4.1.3 The Impact of OTAs on TTAs

This question, concerning the affect OTAs have over TTAs, yielded different responses from the interviewees. For instance, Participant A noted that before the onset of the pandemic, travellers were intrigued by the possibility of planning their own holiday from start to finish; however, travellers are now recognising the convenience of letting the travel agent handle their travelling arrangements. Thus, Participant A did not view TTAs to be at a disadvantage when considering OTAs.

I would say prior to COVID, there are times where people would book online, but we now live in a very, very fast-paced life...And it's come to a point where, at the beginning, when the internet and websites started coming in, it was becoming a trend for people to want to try and organize their own holidays, simply because it was something fascinating, exciting, that they could do it themselves. They used to look at a travel agency job is something, you know, wow. And the fact that they could try and do it themselves was something, you know, as sort of like looked at as an achievement. At the same time, it was fun. Until many people are now in the workforce, we are living a fast-paced life where work has taken over. People are too tired now. People are realizing, especially with long hauls, how much work it entails to organize such an itinerary. (Participant A, 2024.)

That said, Participant B acknowledged that OTAs hold a pricing advantage, pressuring TTAs to ensure that they provide competitive prices. Participant B also emphasised the importance of transparently communicating the added value and costs associated with the services provided by the TTAs. This participant added that the quality of the service offered by TTAs often incurs additional expenses, which can justify the higher prices in comparison to OTAs.

While Participant A asserted that their agency remains relatively unaffected by OTAs and their pricing, as they often manage to offer more competitive rates and stated that; “we do look on Booking.com and funnily enough, when we thought Booking.com used to have good prices, they no longer do because our prices are very, very competitive.” (Participant A, 2024.) They agreed with Participant B that if a TTA’s prices are marginally higher than an OTA’s, customers should consider the service, expertise, and knowledge they are being provided with.

Similarly, Participant C's perspective aligned with both Participants A and Participant B's contributions, asserting that while OTAs may have exerted some influence on TTAs, the latter should focus on offering competitive pricing as customers do indeed compare prices online. Moreover, in agreement with Participant A, Participant C stated that very often, TTAs are able to compete against OTA's prices.

In the following question, the interviewees were also asked whether they face any daily challenges as a result of OTAs.

4.1.4 The Limitations Faced by TTAs

When discussing whether TTAs encounter daily challenges because of OTAs, Participant A argued that they do not face many challenges due to OTAs, adding that most of their challenges are caused by suppliers, such as last-minute cancellations or delays by the airlines. The participant also discussed challenges related to customer demands for additional services, such as booking restaurants or locating a laundromat. On this note, the participant pointed out that customers sometimes rely too much on TTAs, adding that OTAs would not provide such additional services, and customers would have to conduct their own research. Meanwhile, Participant C focused on the challenges related to fulfilling customer demands and providing them with accurate information, as nowadays, customers tend to ask more detailed questions.

Over the years, we have seen that, yes, you now have to be more careful about every little detail, especially that you supply the customers with. They have to know from A to Z, even the distances, that is something going back to, going back to the competition with the online travel agencies. (Participant C, 2024.)

Thus, the travel agent must be able to provide such information with accuracy to their customers. Although this is a relatively simple demand, it is one that OTAs will not offer. Participant B did not mention any additional challenges other than those previously mentioned regarding prices.

During the discussion with the interviewees, the researcher inquired about the possible limitations faced by TTAs in offering certain destinations compared to OTAs, given the global reach of the latter, allowing for unlimited destinations. All the participants, however, agreed that they do not feel limited by the destinations they can offer. Participant A stated that they offer their clients a very vast choice of destinations and do not see any limitations in this regard. On the other hand,

Participant B stated that if the customers know which destination they would like to visit or what type of holiday they are looking for, even when searching online, customers will probably research the destination they are interested in, regardless of what TTAs or OTAs are offering. Participant B added that, in this case, the difference between an OTA and a TTA would be the level of information that the travel agent can offer the customer. Meanwhile, from their experience, Participant C noted how their clientele prefers having direct flights when aiming for European destinations. Unfortunately, however, Malta is limited in this regard. Thus, the only drawback Participant C sees is the fact that only a limited number of direct flights operate to and from Malta. Other than that, this participant stated OTAs and TTAs can offer their customers more or less the same destinations.

Since Participants B and C both issued seasonal brochures, the researcher posed a question regarding their perspectives on this matter asking whether the fact that they have to describe each destination and issue a starting price for the sake of the brochure was considered to be a drawback or an advantage. Participant B stated that despite the additional expense of printing a brochure, in their opinion, it is crucial for their clientele, as many prefer the tangible experience of viewing a printed brochure and stated that “printing a brochure is an added cost...But, but in Malta there are still so many people who prefer having the printed booklet, the printed version rather than the online brochure. So, yes I would say it's still a must to have a printed brochure.” (Participant B, 2024.) Meanwhile, Participant C argued that when it comes to group bookings, which also include excursions and transportation, it is important that clients have all the information at hand.

To conclude the interview findings, the following chapter will present the results obtained from the questionnaire.

4.2 Questionnaire Results

The first few questions of the questionnaire focused on demographics. In which, respondents were asked to provide their age group and the average number of trips they take annually (refer to appendix 2). The questionnaire gathered a total of 240 responses. Notably, the majority of the respondents were between the ages of 40 – 49 years. Moreover, the majority of respondents take an average of one to three trips annually.

The following questions aimed to determine whether the respondents had utilised the services of both TTAs and OTAs. If the respondent selected ‘No’ for either of the questions, the questionnaire

would be terminated accordingly. If they selected 'Yes' for both, then the questionnaire would continue. Among the 240 respondents, 104 respondents (43.33%) answered that they had utilised the services of both types of travel agencies. However, for the purpose of this research, the researcher will be focusing on respondents aged 40 – 70 years. The questionnaire gathered a total of 62 responses in this age group, thus being the primary focus group of this study's analysis.

Following such inquiries, the questionnaire transitioned into questions regarding the respondents' perspective on TTAs and OTAs, the findings of which are presented in the following chapters.

4.2.1 Reasons to Book Through a TTA

The following question asked the respondents to provide reasons why they booked through a TTA. The respondents provided many reasons, with some even giving more than one. Some of these reasons include the comfort and convenience associated with booking through a TTA; beneficial pricing strategies, such as competitive pricing, discounts, special offers, or special rates; the user-friendly booking process; the reliability and trustworthiness of TTAs; the carefully curated packages; the specialised tour packages offered; the well-planned long-hauls or connecting flights; the personalised customer service provided; time-saving and hassle-reducing benefits; the ability to organise specific types of holidays, such as family holidays or group holidays; and particular cases, such as travelling with infants or elderly relatives, or travelling for work. Other respondents indicated that they engaged with TTAs before adopting internet and the subsequent emergence of OTAs.

As presented in Figure 1, the respondents mostly booked through TTAs due to the planned packages they offer (15 mentions – 12.40%) and the specific holidays which they cater for (15 mentions – 12.40%). This indicates that the appeal of planned packages and the need for assistance with organising specific holidays are primary booking factors for the respondents. The respondents also frequently indicated that they book through TTAs for the personalised customer service they provide, which includes personalised itineraries (13 mentions – 10.74%).

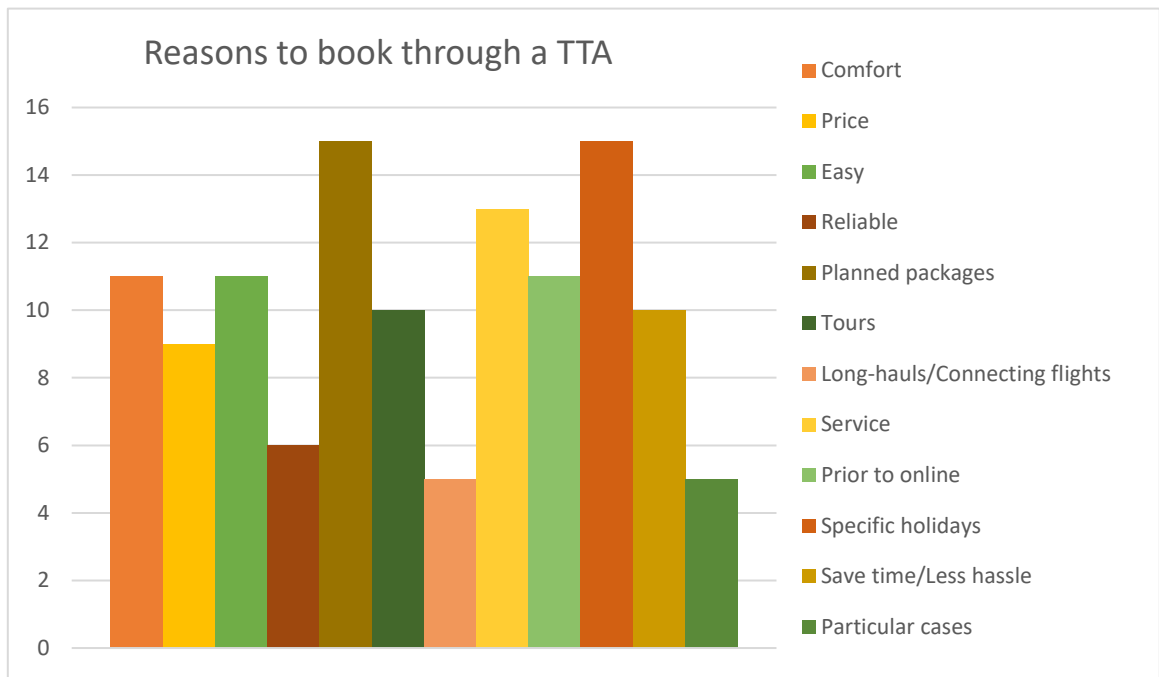


Figure 1. Reasons why travellers book through a TTA (n= 121)

The respondents also mentioned that human face-to-face interaction is valued since it enables them to discuss their travel plans and receive recommendations based on their preferences. The respondents added that they feel reassured when they leave their travel plans in the hands of an expert, as they feel safe, knowing that everything has been carefully planned. This is especially the case when considering particular packages, such as honeymoon packages, when visiting specific destinations that may be remote or hard to get to using public transport, or when travelling to destinations that require a visa. Some mentioned that having their trip planned by a TTA allows them to get the most out of it. Given the various reasons provided for choosing to book through TTAs, it is clear that the latter still continue to offer unique benefits, especially for travellers seeking a more personalised experience and complex itineraries.

4.2.2 Reasons to Book Through an OTA

Similarly, the question that followed asked the respondents to give their reasons why they opted to book through an OTA. Once again, they provided multiple reasons for their choice. Some of these reasons include beneficial pricing strategies, such as competitive pricing, discounts, special offers, or special rates; the accessibility and user-friendliness of online platforms, which can be accessed at any time from diverse locations; the straightforward booking process; the convenience that booking online entails; the ability to book and take advantage of free cancellation

policies allowing the respondents to modify their travel plans; time efficiency, removing the necessity for in-person visits to booking offices; the freedom of planning and customising personal itineraries to their preferences and likings; access to reviews based on past travellers' experiences; the ability to book specific services; the variety of options provided by OTAs; and the flexibility associated with booking platforms. The respondents also listed some other specific reasons why they book through OTAs, such as the fact that they prefer to travel on their own or because they dislike TTAs in general.

As presented in Figure 2, the respondents mostly booked through an OTA due to the price (25 mentions – 21.93%), the simple booking process (21 mentions – 18.42%), and the level of convenience that is provided (16 respondents – 14.04%).

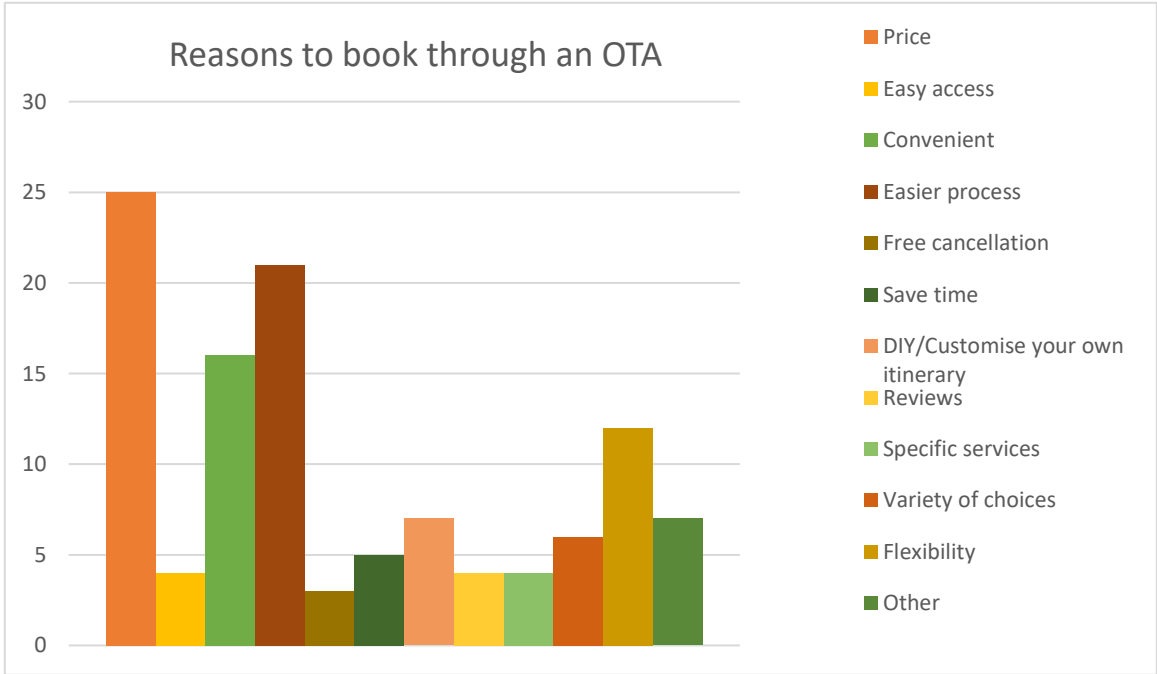


Figure 2. Reasons why travellers book through an OTA (n= 114)

The respondents provided a comprehensive view of why they booked through OTAs, which suggests that the latter offer unique benefits to travellers. The respondents stated that convenience and accessibility are significant factors, especially in today's world, where time-saving measures and efficiency are highly valued. Indeed, the ability to book a holiday from the comfort of one's home is a great benefit. Moreover, booking through an OTA provided the respondents with a sense of control over their holiday as well as the flexibility to plan and manage their holidays as they saw fit by customising their own itineraries. The latter was facilitated as the respondents could, easily compare all available options and choose among them based on

reviews. The respondents also stated that some find it fun to plan their own holidays. Others mentioned that booking through an OTA is their personal preference for last-minute holidays or simply because they need to stay in a particular city for a couple of days.

4.2.3 Services that Require Assistance

Another question focused on which part of the holiday planning process the respondents normally require assistance with. The respondents were provided with six options to choose from, namely booking or finding the appropriate transport services, planning the daily itinerary, finding suitable accommodation, purchasing flight tickets, and purchasing tickets for attractions. The last option was labelled 'Other', allowing the respondents to specify any other services that were not listed. The respondents who selected the Other option mainly indicated that they either require assistance with all or none of the aforementioned services. Two respondents, however, stated that the services with which they require assistance depend on the type of holiday they are going for. For instance, one might require no assistance when going on a short holiday in a European city but would need help when booking a long-haul trip to a remote or unfamiliar destination.

As can be seen in Figure 3, the service which the respondents struggle with the most is finding suitable accommodation that suits their preferences (17 respondents – 26.98%), followed by planning the itinerary (12 respondents – 19.05%) and finding transport (9 respondents – 14.29%). Seven respondents (11.11%) indicated that they require assistance with purchasing flight tickets. Another seven respondents (11.11%) stated that they require assistance with none of the services. Meanwhile, the respondents required the least assistance with purchasing tickets for attractions (6 respondents – 9.52%), followed by those requiring assistance with all of the services listed (3 respondents – 4.76%).

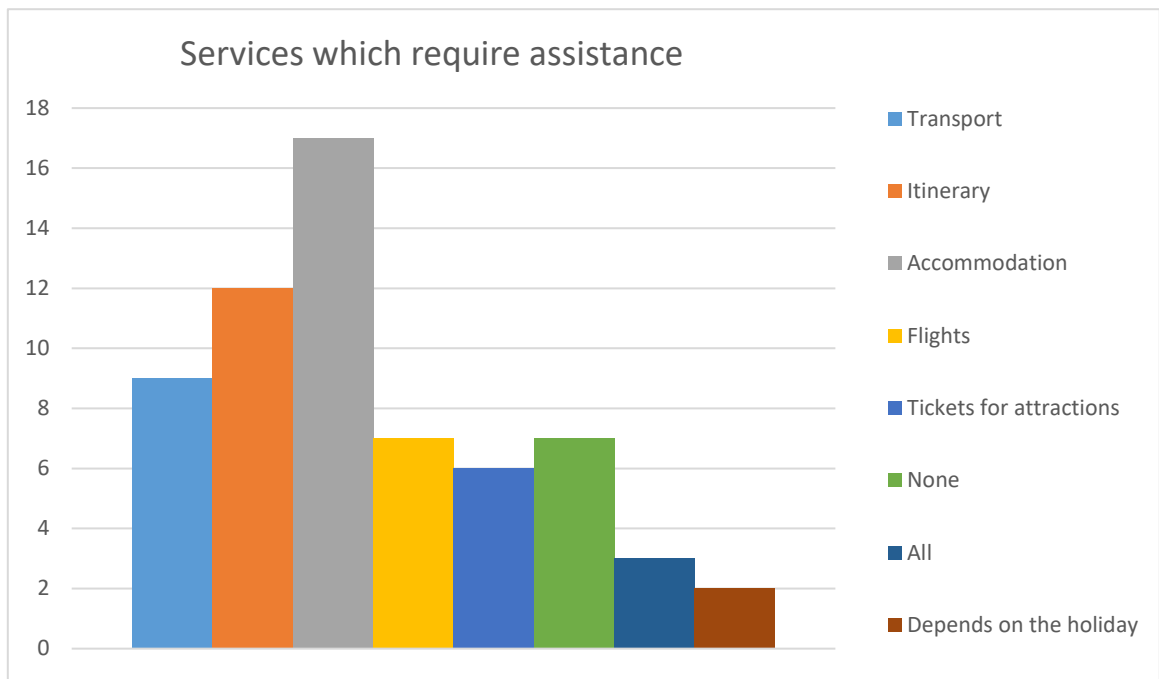


Figure 3. Services which the respondents require assistance with (n = 63)

4.2.4 Important Benefits

The following questions aimed to find out which of the TTAs and OTAs benefits are considered important by the respondents. The researcher provided five benefits of TTAs and OTAs, and the respondents were asked to rate how important each benefit is for them. The respondents were asked to rate each benefit on a scale from 'very important' to 'extremely not important', with 'neutral' indicating a neutral position about the benefit's importance. Meanwhile when a benefit is rated as 'somewhat important', this indicates that the benefit is considered important but not a primary factor that influences booking-related decisions, while a 'very important' rating implies that the benefit highly influences booking-related decisions. Contrarily, the 'extremely not important' and 'not so important' ratings imply that the benefit carries little to no importance.

When considering TTAs the researcher provided the following benefits: the reliable information provided, face-to-face interaction with staff members, the competitive prices, the ability to compare prices, and the visually appealing brochures issued by TTAs. Very important and somewhat important were the most commonly chosen ratings, while extremely not important and not so important were the least frequently chosen ones. Figure 4 presents the results obtained.

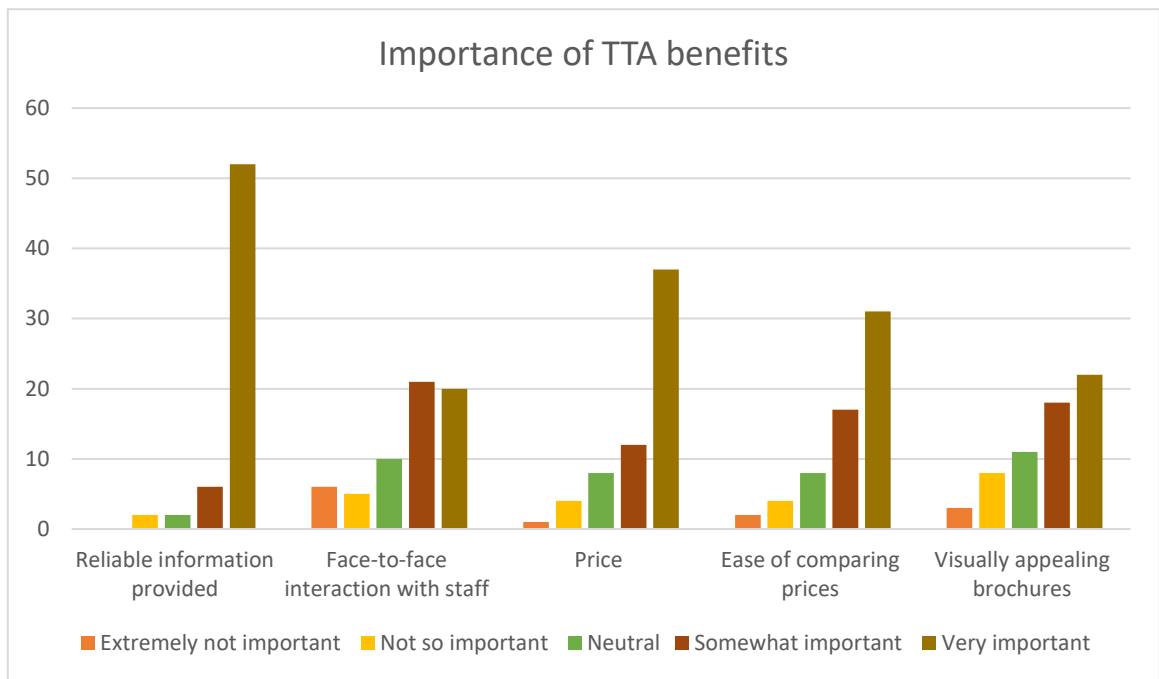


Figure 4. Ratings showing the importance of TTAs' benefits for respondents (n = 62)

The reliable information provided was rated as the most important benefit of TTAs, with 52 respondents rating it as very important and an additional six respondents rating it as somewhat important (a total of 93.55%). Only two respondents (3.23%) rated the information provided as not so important, while another two (3.23%) were neutral on the benefit. None of the respondents rated this benefit as extremely not important.

Price was also rated as an important benefit, with 37 respondents rating it as very important and 12 respondents rating it as somewhat important (a total of 79.03%). Nonetheless, eight respondents (12.90%) were neutral on the importance of price, four respondents (6.45%) rated it as not so important, and one respondent (1.61%) rated price as extremely not important.

This corresponds with what the respondents rated as the third most important benefit, which is the ease of comparing prices. Half of the respondents (31) rated this benefit very important, while 17 respondents rated it as somewhat important (a total of 77.42%). Meanwhile, eight respondents (12.90%) were neutral, four respondents (6.45%) rated it as not so important, and two respondents (3.23%) rated it as extremely not important.

The next best-rated benefit is face-to-face interaction with TTA staff members. This benefit received the lowest number of very important ratings (20 respondents) but had the highest number

of somewhat important ratings (21 respondents; a total of 66.13%). Six respondents (9.67%) rated this benefit as extremely not important, while five (8.06%) rated it as not so important. The remaining 10 respondents (16.13%) were neutral on the importance of face-to-face interaction.

Lastly, the importance of having visually appealing brochures received varied ratings. In all, 22 respondents rated it as very important, while 18 rated it as somewhat important (a total of 64.52%). This benefit received the highest number of neutral ratings (11 respondents – 17.74%). The total number of not so important and extremely not important ratings also equalled 11 respondents (17.74%).

Similarly, the respondents were asked to rate the following benefits of OTAs: the convenience of booking through an OTA, the competitive pricing that they offer, the ability to compare prices, the free and easily accessible information provided, and the visually appealing websites. The results obtained are presented in Figure 5.

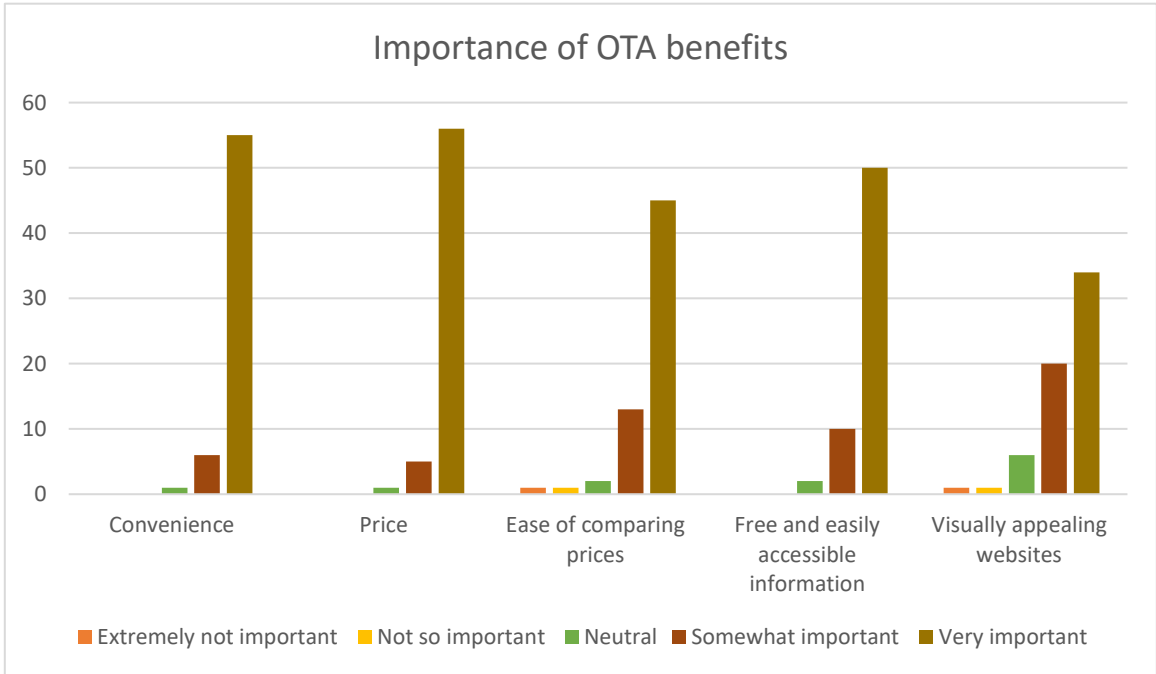


Figure 5. Ratings showing the importance of OTAs’ benefits for the respondents (n = 62)

The benefits of convenience and price were deemed highly important as they received the most of important ratings. In all, 56 respondents rated price as very important, while five respondents rated it as somewhat important. On the other hand, 55 respondents rated convenience as very important, while six respondents rated it as somewhat important. Thus, both received a total of 98.39% important ratings. For each benefit, one respondent (1.61%) selected the neutral option. This indicates that convenience and price are two crucial factors that could influence potential travellers' decision to book online through OTAs.

Free and easy access to information is also valued by the respondents, of whom 50 respondents rated this as very important and another 10 respondents as somewhat important (a total of 96.77%). The remaining two respondents (3.23%) were neutral on the importance of accessible information.

The ability to compare prices easily is another important benefit of OTAs, as 45 respondents rated it as very important, while 13 respondents rated it as somewhat important (a total of 93.55%). On the other hand, two respondents (3.23%) were neutral on the importance of this benefit and one respondent (1.61%) rated it as not so important while another one respondent (1.61%) rated it as extremely not important.

Lastly, the visually appealing website benefit received more varied ratings, with 34 respondents rating it as very important and another 20 rating it as somewhat important (a total of 87.10%). An additional six respondents (9.68%) were neutral on the importance of appealing websites, while the remaining one respondent (1.61%) rated it as not so important while another one respondent (1.61%) rated it as extremely not important.

Since the respondents value free and easy access to information, the following question asked the respondents whether they trust the accuracy and reliability of the information provided by OTAs. As presented in Figure 6, most of the respondents (75.81%) indicated that they somewhat trust the information provided, while 20.97% indicated that they completely trust this information, and a small percentage (3.23%) indicated that they do not trust the information provided.

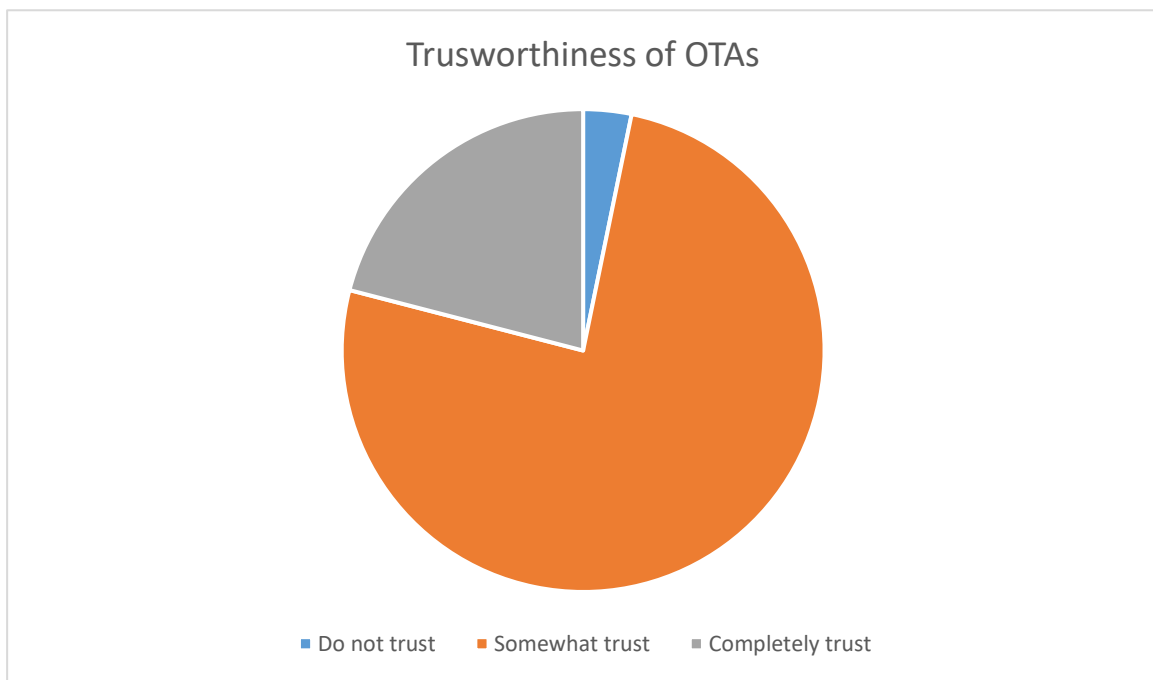


Figure 6. The trustworthiness of OTAs (n = 62)

4.2.5 Issues when Booking Through TTAs and OTAs

The following questions were related to issues that the respondents may have encountered when booking through TTAs and OTAs.

The respondents were first asked whether they had ever encountered any issues or concerns when booking through OTAs. The majority (48 respondents – 77.24%) stated that they had never experiences any issues, while 14 respondents (22.58%) mentioned that they did encounter some problems. The 14 respondents were asked to indicate what type of issues were encountered. As presented in Figure 7, these issues can be divided into the following categories: issues with the hotel or accommodation facilities, airline-related issues, issues with car rental, discrepancies in the information provided, issues with the payment or fees, and other issues. Some participants selected more than one category.

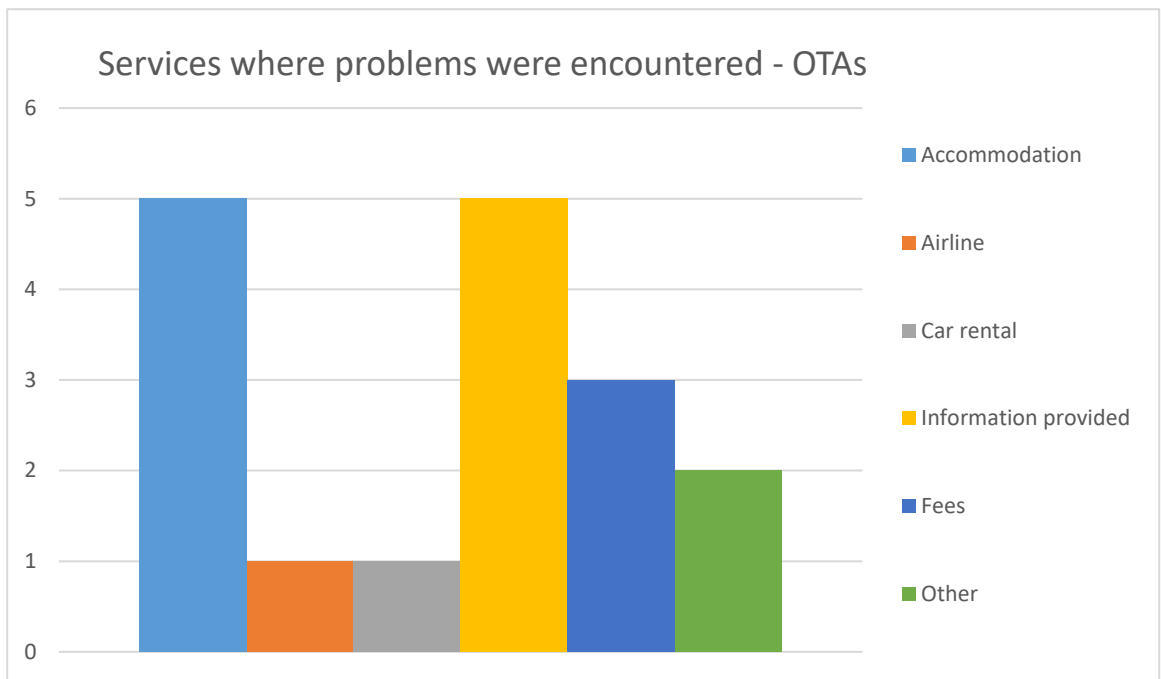


Figure 7. Services booked through OTAs where problems were encountered (n = 17)

The main issues encountered were related to the accommodation services and the accuracy of the information provided (29.41% each). The issues encountered included hotels or rooms that were not as advertised or up to standard, as well as receiving misleading information. Reservation issues also included overbooking or cancellations, which were followed by resale at higher prices. Issues related to pricing and fees (17.65%) involved instances where the respondents had to pay twice for a service, were unaware of hidden costs, or were charged a higher price than advertised. Additional issues (11.76%) included problems with cancellation policies and instances where the reservation was not made.

The respondents were then asked if such issues or concerns affected their booking preferences. As presented in Figure 8, the majority of the respondents (six respondents – 42.86%) indicated that this negative experience did indeed affect their booking preferences, as they no longer book with that particular OTA. Another five respondents (35.71%) indicated that their booking preferences were not affected in any way. The three remaining respondents (21.43%) stated that while their experience affected their booking preferences, they still book through the same OTA.

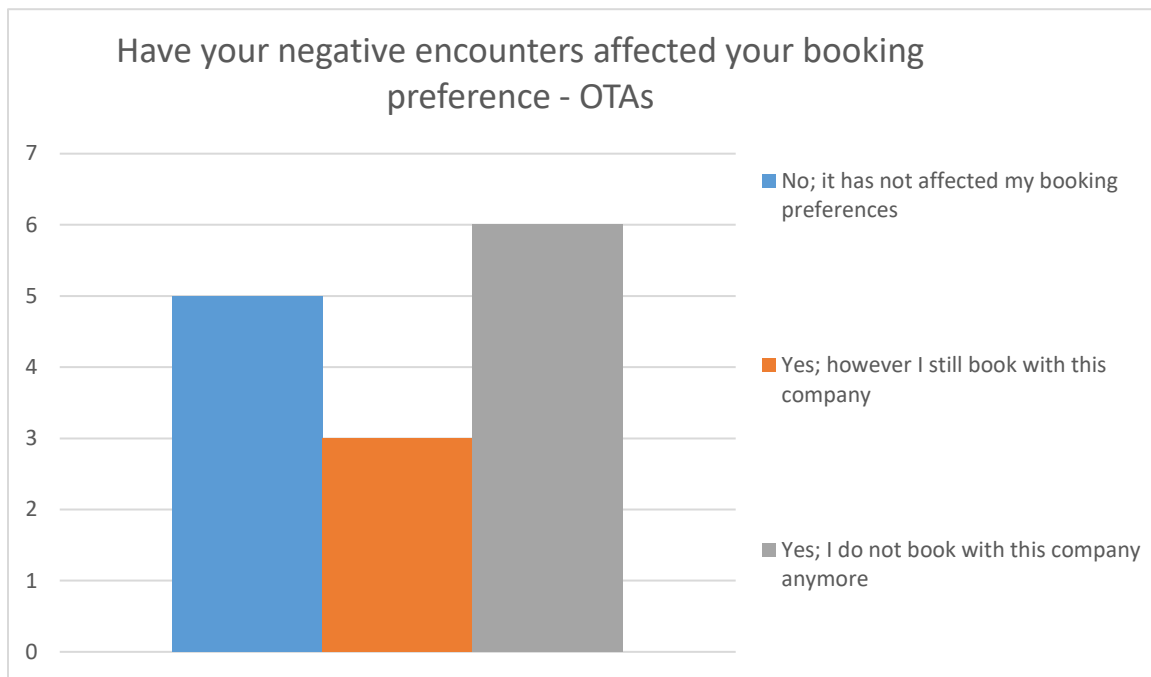


Figure 8. How the issues encountered affected the respondents' booking preferences – OTAs (n= 14)

The same question was asked in relation to TTAs. Once again, the majority (44 respondents – 70.97%) stated that no issues were encountered, while 18 respondents (29.03%) indicated that they did encounter some issues. When asked to elaborate on these issues, the responses were also quite varied and can be categorised as follows: problems with the information provided, issues with the service provided, flexibility issues, pricing issues, and other issues.

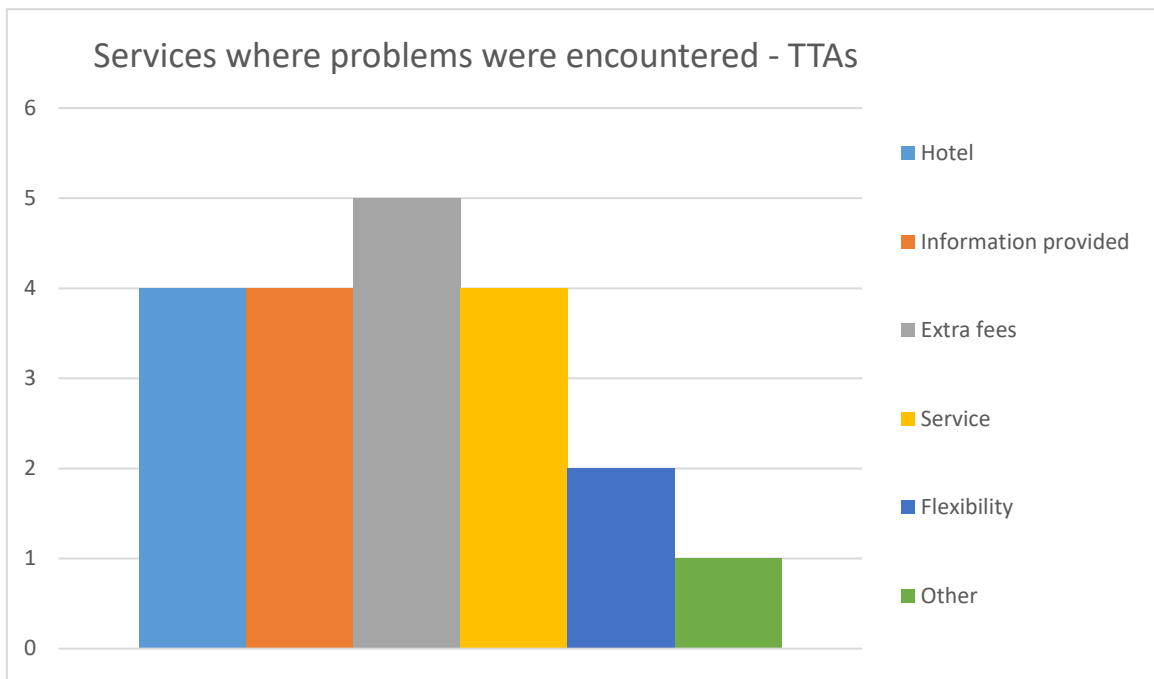


Figure 9. Services booked through TTAs where problems were encountered (n = 20)

As presented in Figure 9, the issues encountered were predominantly related to pricing (25%). The respondents reported that they encountered discrepancies between the prices they were charged and the advertised prices of products or services, as well as hidden fees.

Issues with the accommodation, the information provided, and the service provided received an equal number of mentions (20% each). When booking through TTAs, the respondents faced similar accommodation-related issues to those encountered when booking through OTAs. Indeed, the respondents stated that they were inconvenienced by hotels that were not up to standard or not centrally located. Furthermore, they also mentioned how the information provided was, at times, not detailed enough, outdated, or inaccurate. Additionally, the respondents faced a number of service-related issues, like communication issues among travel agents and unpleasant tour leaders. The respondents also referred to flexibility issues mainly due to the fact that the TTAs did not provide them with a choice. Unfortunately, the respondents did not specify what choices they found lacking. Lastly, one respondent (5%) mentioned that they encountered issues with the travel insurance policy, which they purchased through the TTA.

The following question sought to find out how the respondents' booking preferences were affected after encountering such issue. As can be seen in Figure 10 most of the respondents (11 respondents – 61.11%) stated that their negative encounters resulted in them no longer booking

through that particular TTA. Meanwhile, four respondents (20%) stated that their preferences have not changed while the remaining three respondents (15%) indicated that while the issues they encountered affected them, they still book through the same TTA. Ultimately, the decision to rebook through the same travel agency depends on the impact that the negative experience left on the customers.

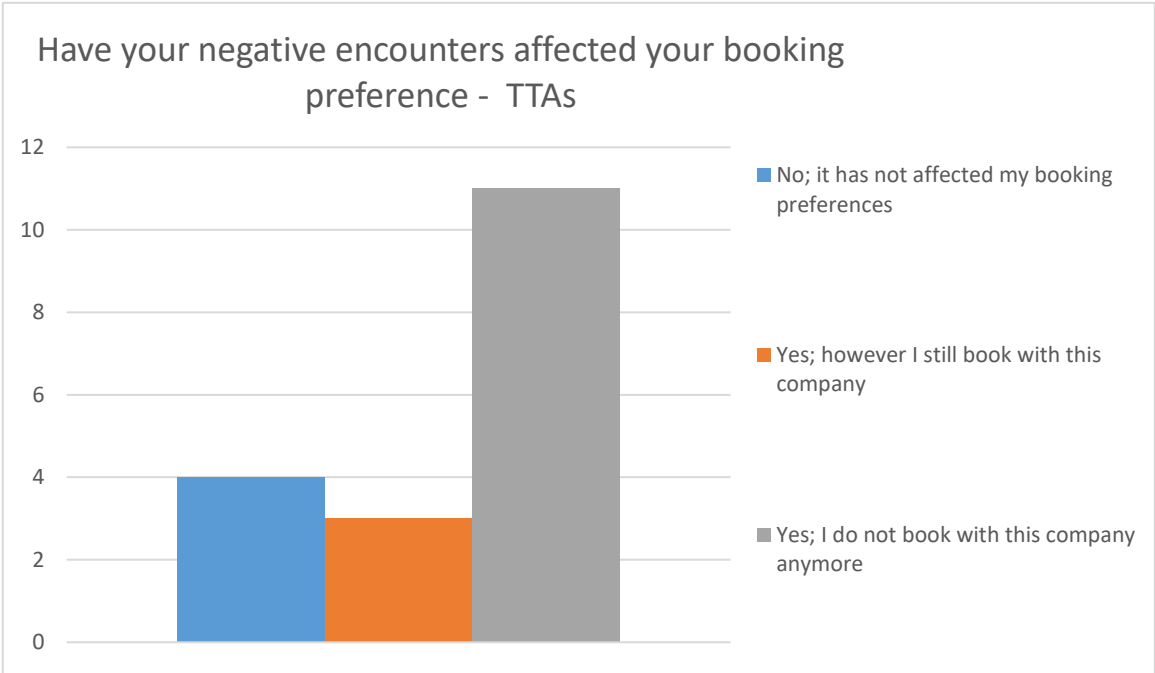


Figure 10. How the issues encountered affected the respondents' booking preference – TTAs (n= 18)

4.2.6 Preferred Travel Agency

Another question focused on whether the respondents generally prefer booking through OTAs or TTAs. As can be seen in Figure 11, out of the 62 respondents, 51 (82.25%) prefer to utilise the services of OTAs whilst 12 respondents (19.35%) prefer the services of TTAs.

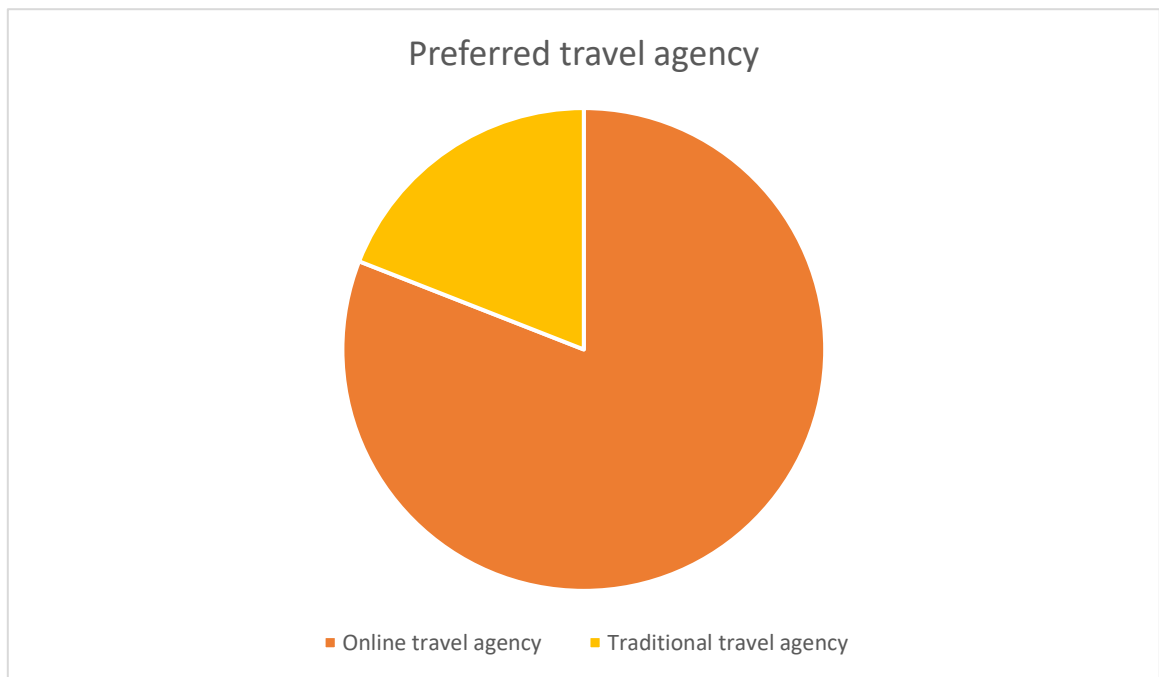


Figure 11. Preferred travel agency. (n=62)

The final question asked the respondents which agency they prefer booking with, depending on the type of holiday. The question was open-ended which allowed the respondents to write down their preferences. As presented in Figure 12, some respondents (15 respondents – 20.27%) indicated that they have no preference at all. Meanwhile nine respondents (12.16%) stated that they prefer to always use the services of OTAs, while two others (2.70%) stated that they prefer to always use the services of TTAs. Other respondents indicated that they do not have an overall preference in this regard, adding that their preferences depend on various factors, such as the destination they shall be visiting or the type of holiday they are looking for (seven respondents – 9.46%), and the price and convenience that is offered to them (nine respondents – 12.16%).

The remaining respondents who indicated that they do have a preference, provided more detail on their preferences. They stated that they prefer booking through OTAs when going on business trips (four mentions – 5.41%), short or spontaneous trips (five mentions – 6.76%), trips that involve visiting or staying in cities (three mentions – 4.05%), solo trips (two mentions – 2.70%), and family trips (four mentions – 5.41%). Conversely, the respondents indicated that they prefer booking through TTAs when it comes to family trips (two mentions – 2.70%), tours (three mentions – 4.05%), and travelling to destinations outside the EU or places they are not familiar with (nine mentions – 12.16%).

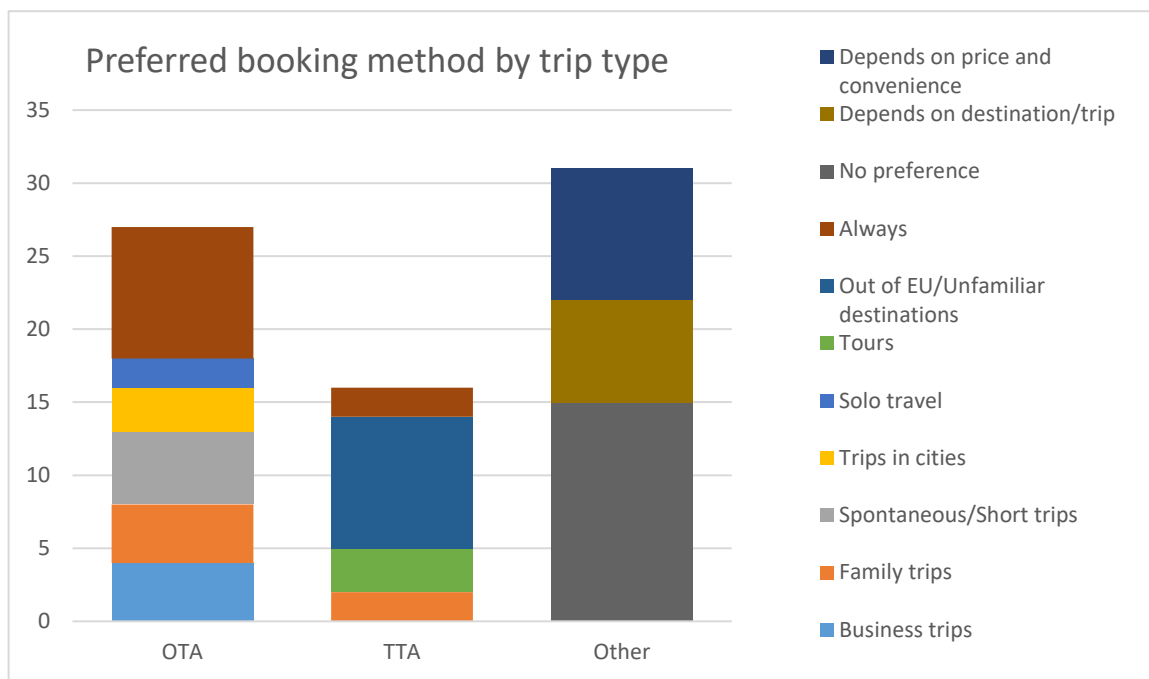


Figure 12. Preferred booking method by agency type and trip type (n= 74)

4.3 Analysis and Discussion

In this section, a discussion is carried out to analyse and triangulate the results obtained from the interviews and questionnaires, which have been presented in the previous sections.

The questionnaire responses suggest that the respondents book through OTAs primarily due to their competitive pricing, convenience, and accessibility, which emerged as the main advantages of OTAs. This finding is backed by the literature review sources (see section 2.3.1) which identified that price, along with the ease of price comparison, is a crucial factor for travellers that greatly affects their choices (Kyomba, et al., 2022). Moreover, offering free information which is accessible anywhere and at any time also attracts a lot of potential customers and influences them in their decision-making process (Angeloni & Rossi, 2021; Briez, et al. 2021; Huang, et al., 2022). The literature sources identified that such factors contribute to the success of OTAs. The questionnaires results confirm this view, with the respondents clearly indicating that these are the reasons why they prefer booking through OTAs although some respondents indicated that they encountered issues with price transparency. These results imply that OTAs must prioritise competitive pricing to attract and retain customers since pricing and free information evidently influence potential travellers' decision-making process when it comes to picking between OTAs and TTAs. OTAs should also ensure payment transparency to prevent hidden costs and

cancellation policies should be clearly labelled, especially since competitive pricing and the ease of comparing prices are more valued in OTAs than TTAs. Addressing such weaknesses should provide customers with a better experience. Furthermore, continued investment in the user experience is crucial to ensure that their platforms continue to be convenient for their users.

When it comes to trusting the information provided by OTAs, the questionnaire results indicate that the respondents lean more towards trusting the information provided. That said, there is still room for improvement for OTAs, especially when it comes to enhancing transparency to maintain trust amongst their customers, since the respondents seemed to be sceptical about the information provided. Indeed, the questionnaire results also reveal that 29.41% of the respondents encountered issues with the information provided by OTAs, making this a significant weakness and major disadvantage of such travel agencies. Similarly, based on the findings of Vyas (2019) and Huang, et al. (2022) (see section 2.3.1), customers do not blindly trust OTAs. However, the transparency that OTAs offer their customers, especially since the latter can view others' reviews is a significant advantage (Angeloni & Rossi, 2021). It is essential that OTAs provide accurate and reliable information to retain customers. Moreover, giving a truthful representation of the services they offer, especially when advertising accommodation, is key to enhancing customer trust and satisfaction, ultimately, improving their competitiveness in the online travel industry.

Another advantage that was highlighted in the literature review (see section 2.3.1) is that well-designed websites attract potential customers (Kotronoulas, et al., 2023; Park, et al., 2019). That said, while the questionnaire results indicate the importance of visually appealing websites, they also reveal that such websites do not necessarily determine the final booking decision. Interestingly, the results also imply that visually appealing websites are valued more than visually appealing brochures issued by TTAs. This can be due to the fact that visually appealing websites are more convenient and assessible. Nonetheless, as stated in the literature review by Acop, et al. (2020) (see section 2.2.1), despite their cost and time consumption, TTAs put a lot of effort into creating visually appealing brochures. The interviewees supported this point, stating that although costly, it is crucial for their clientele to have tangible brochures as they would have all the necessary information in their hands. Overall, the findings indicate that while visually appealing websites are ideal for OTAs to attract customers, other factors play a more significant role in affecting the latter's decision-making process. On the other hand, TTAs should strive to balance traditional and digital marketing efforts to cater to the evolving preferences of their clientele.

The questionnaire responses indicate a shift in the travellers' preferences towards OTAs. The literature discussed in literature review (see section 2.2) concurs with such results, highlighting how the adoption of the internet has imposed challenges on TTAs and that the latter should reaffirm their role to remain competitive (Abrate, et al., 2020; Munikrishnan & Mamun, 2021). On the contrary, despite the questionnaire results and literature sources suggesting a trend towards OTAs, the interviewees argued that TTAs have continued to succeed and are even favoured by some. They also added that TTAs have remained relatively unaffected by the integration of OTAs into the industry. It could be that, as recommended by the aforementioned literature sources, the interviewees' TTAs have modified the services they offer or set themselves apart from OTAs in a way that retains customers. On the other hand, these findings suggest that OTAs need to continuously enhance their services to maintain their position as the travellers' preferred choice.

A disadvantage of OTAs that was explored in literature review (see section 2.3.1) is communication difficulties. Indeed, if a problem arises, customers cannot easily contact the OTA (Whitmore, 2019). This was also pointed out by the interviewees, who stated that in case of an emergency, TTAs offer timely support to their customers. Moreover, the latter would also know who the agent handling their booking is, which is not always the case with OTAs since customers booking through OTAs often interact with unknown entities. This is a significant disadvantage for OTAs; therefore, they should work on enhancing their communication with their customers.

An advantage of TTAs that was predominant through all three data collection methods is face-to-face interaction. As stated in the literature review (see section 2.2.1), face-to-face interaction mitigates risk, facilitates conversations, and helps with the decision-making process (Liao, 2020; Munikrishnan & Mamun, 2021). The interviewees, too, agreed that face-to-face interaction is a significant advantage for their customers, as it enables them to engage in discussions with professionals, ensuring that they get the most out of their trip. Meanwhile, the questionnaire results present face-to-face interaction as a moderately important benefit of TTAs. This discrepancy between the literature's findings, interviewees' opinions and the questionnaire results suggests that the travellers' preferences are evolving, influenced by factors such as changing technology. Meanwhile, TTAs should continue to leverage face-to-face interaction as a unique selling point. By focusing on this advantage, TTAs can continue to meet the needs of customers who value such interaction.

Apart from face-to-face interaction, the level of service provided by TTAs is also an added benefit. The interviewees stated that customers visiting a travel agency benefit from both personalised

services and the travel agent's expertise, fostering a sense of security and trust in their interactions. This aligns with Liao's (2020) argument (see section 2.2.1) that customers book through TTAs for the experience they offer. Similarly, based on the questionnaire results, the service provided was the second-most mentioned reason why respondents book through TTAs. Nonetheless, some respondents mentioned issues about the service provided, implying that there is room for improvement. These findings suggest that TTAs should improve their services to meet customers' expectations, customer satisfaction and brand loyalty can be enhanced by delivering excellent service. Moreover, addressing any issues raised by travellers, can further elevate any TTAs reputation and trustworthiness.

Moreover, the literature sources state that TTAs can provide their customers with lesser-known information that might not be easily accessible (Abrate, et al., 2020). The interviewees, in fact, argued that when booking through an OTA, the customers have to research everything themselves while making sure that the information they are provided with is reliable. Meanwhile, the questionnaire results indicate that the respondents highly value the importance of the reliable information provided by TTAs. This indicates that the respondents trust TTAs and are sure that they provide accurate information. Despite their trust in TTAs, however, the questionnaire results also reveal that some respondents reported issues related to the information provided. Therefore, TTAs must ensure that they provide accurate and reliable information to maintain their customers' trust and enhance their reputation.

The price advantage of TTAs is highlighted by Talwar, et al. (2020) (see section 2.2.1) who discuss that TTAs can be cheaper than OTAs since they generally have access to special rates, especially when it comes to booking connecting flights. Similarly, the interviewees also argued that their rates are competitive with those of OTAs adding that if TTAs' prices are slightly higher, one should also consider that service, expertise, and security are also part of the price. That said, the questionnaire responses indicate that only 7.44% of the respondents prioritise price as a main factor when booking through a TTA despite the fact that 79.03% of the respondents value price as an important benefit. This indicates that price is not a primary factor that influences booking-related decisions although it is still highly valued. Other factors such as organised packages are more prioritised when making booking-related decisions. Apart from price, price transparency is also valued as travellers aim to obtain good value for the money spent when booking through a TTA. This is facilitated by the ability to easily compare prices which was also rated as quite an important benefit of TTAs. The questionnaires results also reveal that certain issues related to price and hidden fees were encountered when booking through TTAs. Moreover, the number of respondents who

decided not to book with the same TTA after a negative encounter was higher than those who refuse to book with the same OTA after a negative encounter. This implies that negative experiences with TTAs have more impact on customer loyalty. Thus, it is important that TTAs adopt more transparent pricing without any additional charges, especially since customers have the option to compare prices online.

4.4 Conclusion

Overall, this chapter presented an analysis of the interviewees' contributions and the respondents' booking preferences. The latter generally seemed to favour OTAs for the availability of free, accessible information, the ease of comparing prices, and convenience. On the other hand, based on the data gathered, despite the challenges they may face due to the adoption of the internet and OTAs, TTAs still offer distinct advantages, such as face-to-face interaction, personalised service, and expertise. Nonetheless, certain issues related to reliability and transparency are persistent in both types of agencies. On this note, travel agencies need to acknowledge the fact that one negative experience can affect customer retention. Indeed, although some respondents still opted to book through the same travel agency despite facing issues, travel agencies should still address and eliminate any problems to prevent them from being repeated in the future, thus ensuring their success in this competitive market.

In the following chapter the researcher will provide their final arguments based on these analysed results. These arguments will determine whether the aims and objectives of this study have been met. The researcher will reflect on the insights obtained during the research process, offering reflections on this study's methodology and implications for future research.

5. Final Arguments

In this chapter, the researcher assesses whether the aims and objectives of this study have been met while also analysing its strengths and weaknesses. Recommendations for future research are also provided to contribute to further advancements within the travel industry.

5.1 Conclusions

The primary aim of this study was to investigate the advantages and disadvantages of both TTAs and OTAs. Based on the findings obtained, the advantages of OTAs include the ability to access free information anytime and anywhere, the convenience and ease of online booking, as well as the ability to obtain cheap rates, benefit from discounts and compare prices. On the contrary, some disadvantages of OTAs concern issues with trust and reliability; despite the fact that OTAs offer their customers more transparency through customer reviews, issues concerning the information provided and pricing transparency were persistent. This study's findings, in fact, prove that it is for these reasons that customers do not completely trust the accuracy of the information provided by OTAs.

Meanwhile, according to the gathered data, some advantages of TTAs include face-to-face interaction, personalised services, and the travel agents' expertise. The findings also prove that despite the growing preference for OTAs, TTAs are still persistent intermediaries within the travel industry due to their unique selling points and ability to cater for specific travellers. On the other hand, the disadvantages faced by TTAs include issues with pricing and hidden fees as well as lacking online presence (e.g. insufficient use of digital marketing strategies), meaning that customers must visit the TTA physically to receive a service.

As stated, this study also intended to determine the booking preferences of Maltese travellers aged between 40 and 70 years. From the data collected, it can be concluded that Maltese travellers generally prefer the services of OTAs more than those of TTAs. This preference is driven by various factors, such as competitive pricing, convenience, and accessibility. However, this does not mean that travellers are putting TTAs aside; the data collected indicate that while OTAs are preferred for certain attributes, TTAs offer distinctive advantages with Maltese travellers opting to utilise their services for specific journeys like family holidays or long hauls. It must be noted that when travellers utilise the services of TTAs, they tend to expect more from the travel agents, such as a more personalised service, which wouldn't be offered to them if they had booked through

OTAs. Additionally, based on the questionnaires, some travellers evaluate both OTA and TTA options before making their booking decisions. Such travellers opt for the agency that best meets their needs and preferences without being loyal to either.

That said, there is room for improvement when considering both TTAs and OTAs, especially when it comes to satisfying their customers' needs. TTAs should enhance their online presence to maintain closer relations with their customers and adopt more transparent pricing to facilitate the latter's booking experience. On the other hand, OTAs can focus on enhancing the customer service, especially in case of emergencies, and ensure that they provide reliable and accurate information.

5.2 Recommendations

The following recommendations are intended to deepen the understanding of the continuously evolving landscape of the travel industry, focusing especially on travel agencies.

Future research can delve into technological advancements, such as artificial intelligence and virtual reality. While such technologies may enhance the customers' experience, they may affect the operations of both TTAs and OTAs.

Another topic that may be explored is sustainability. Researchers can explore the adoption of sustainable practices to reduce carbon footprint, how responsible tourism can be promoted, and how local communities may be supported.

This study briefly discussed marketing strategies like having visually appealing websites and brochures. Future studies can further evaluate the marketing strategies employed by TTAs and OTAs, discussing both traditional and digital marketing strategies.

5.3 Evaluation, Reliability, and Validity

Evaluation, validity, and reliability are crucial factors that should be taken into account to ensure a study's credibility.

5.3.1 Evaluation

Upon completing this study, the researcher conducted an evaluation to assess its strengths and weaknesses. This study provided a detailed analysis of the advantages and disadvantages of OTAs and TTAs, indicating a thorough understanding of the existing literature on the topic. By utilising a mixed-method approach comprising both interviews and questionnaires, this study further broadened its findings, offering a more nuanced understanding of the participating travellers' booking preferences. The research findings were clearly presented, and the insights obtained from the data were highlighted. Additionally, the researcher employed triangulation methods when analysing the results obtained, which added clarity and coherence to the discussion and further enhanced the credibility of the findings obtained. Since multiple data collection methods were utilised, triangulation ensured that the results were not based on one source. On the other hand, one limitation faced by this study is the questionnaire's sample size. Obtaining more responses within the chosen age group would have overcome this limitation and strengthened the study's results.

5.3.2 Reliability and Validity

A study's reliability and validity are ensured when its findings are deemed trustworthy and accurate. As stated, the researcher collected data from multiple sources, including interviews, questionnaires, and peer-reviewed articles, which enhanced the study's credibility and validity. The thorough literature review carried out at the beginning of the research process guaranteed that the study was based on current theoretical frameworks, thus improving the validity of the study. It also must be noted that the researcher conducted a pilot study to ensure that the credibility and trustworthiness of the study's outcomes, ensuring that the study measures what it is intended to measure. Conducting one-to-one interviews also eliminated participant bias by creating a comfortable environment, further ensured the data's reliability. Efforts to mitigate such biases and address the limitations that were faced throughout the research process demonstrate the researcher's commitment to reinforcing the study's internal validity, which focuses on the accuracy of the results obtained and external validity, which focuses on how well the study's findings can be generalised in other populations. Adhering to research protocols and ethical considerations throughout the research process also enhanced the reliability of the research findings by ensuring consistency and minimising the risk of inaccuracies.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Questionnaire Questions

1. Age Group
 - 18 – 20
 - 20 – 25
 - 25 – 30
 - 30 – 35
 - 40 – 45
 - 50 – 55
 - 60 – 65
 - 70 – 75
 - 75 – 80
 - 80+

2. On average, how many trips a year do you take?
 - 0 – 1
 - 1 – 3
 - 3 – 5
 - More than 5

3. Have you ever heard of traditional travel agencies such as local travel agencies?
 - Yes
 - No

4. Have you ever heard of online travel agencies such as Booking.com, Expedia?
 - Yes
 - No

5. Have you ever booked through a traditional travel agency?
 - Yes
 - No

6. Have you ever booked through an online travel agency?
 - Yes
 - No

7. Mention some reasons why you have booked through an online travel agency.

8. Mention some reasons why you have booked through a traditional travel agency.
9. Why type of agency do you book through the most?
 - Online Travel Agency
 - Traditional Travel Agency
10. When booking a trip, what services do you normally require assistance with?
 - Purchasing flight tickets
 - Finding suitable accommodation
 - Transportation
 - Purchasing Tickets for Attractions
 - Planning the Itinerary
 - Other
11. What benefits of traditional travel agencies are considered important for you?
(Very Important, Somewhat Important, Neutral, Not so Important, Extremely Not Important)
 - Reliable information provided
 - Face-to-face interaction with staff members
 - Price
 - Ease of comparing prices
 - Visually appealing brochures
12. What benefits of online travel agencies are considered important for you?
(Very Important, Somewhat Important, Neutral, Not so Important, Extremely Not Important)
 - Convenience (Booking anytime, anywhere)
 - Price
 - Ease of comparing prices
 - Information is free and easily accessible
 - Visually Appealing websites
13. Do you trust the accuracy and reliability of information provided by online travel agencies?
 - Completely trust the accuracy and reliability of information provided
 - Somewhat trust the accuracy and reliability of information provided
 - Do not trust the accuracy and reliability of information provided
14. Have you ever encountered any issues or concerns when booking through online travel agencies?
 - Yes
 - Not

- a. If yes, can you please specify what type of issues or concerns where experiences?
- b. If yes, have such issues or concerns affected your preferred method of booking nowadays?
 - Yes, I do not book with this company anymore
 - Yes, However I still book with this company
 - Yes, I do not use traditional travel agencies when booking anymore
 - No, it has not affected my booking preferences

15. Have you ever encountered any issues or concerns when booking through traditional travel agencies?

- Yes
- No

- a. If yes, can you please specify what type of issues or concerns where experiences?
- b. If yes, have such issues or concerns affected your preferred method of booking nowadays?
 - Yes, I do not book with this company anymore
 - Yes, However I still book with this company
 - Yes, I do not use traditional travel agencies when booking anymore
 - No, it has not affected my booking preferences

16. Are there any types of trips where you prefer using online travel agencies rather than traditional travel agencies? (Example: One prefers using traditional travel agencies for family trips whilst using online travel agencies for business trips)

17. Please feel free to leave any comments you would like to add about your travel preferences.

Appendix 2: Questionnaire Results

The initial questions of the questionnaire focused on the demographics of the respondents. Hereunder are the results obtained from such questions.

The first question asked the respondents to identify their age group.

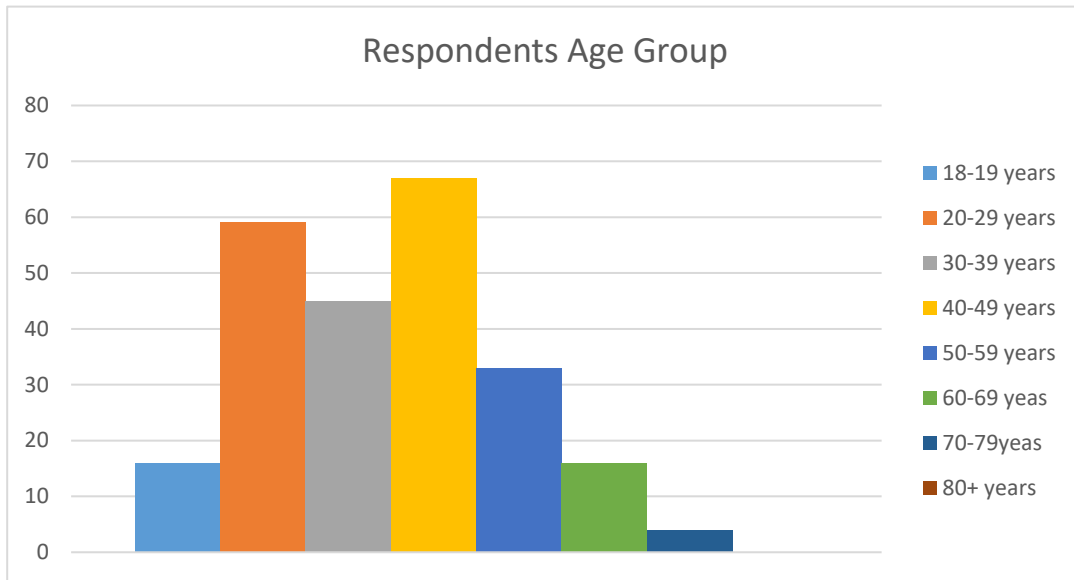


Figure 13. The respondents age group (n=240)

The second question asked the respondents to identify the average number of trips they take annually.

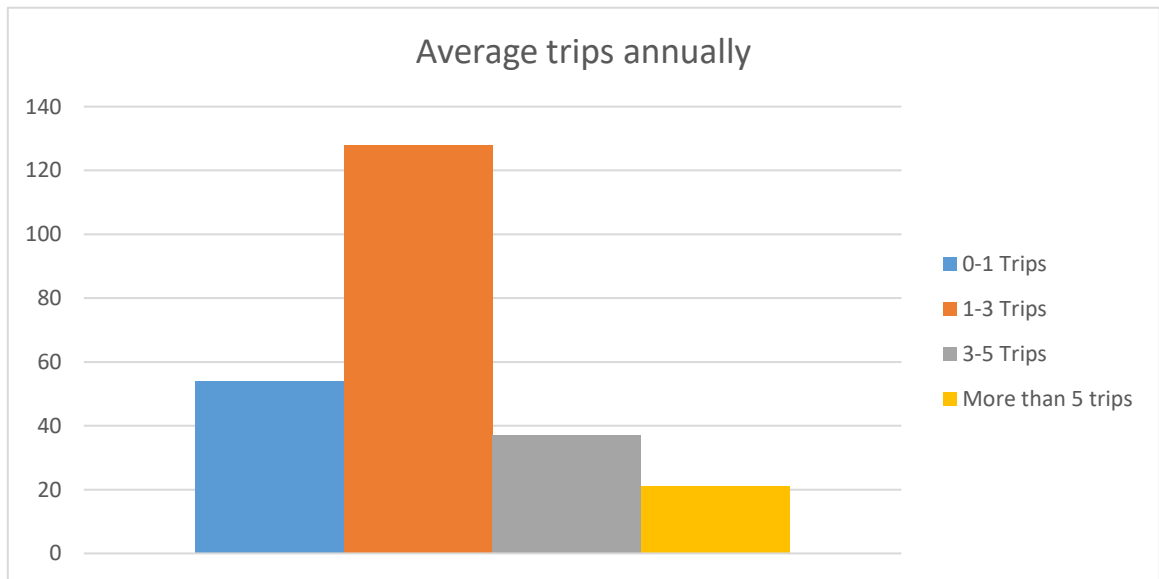


Figure 14. Average trips annually (n=240)

Appendix 3: Interview Questions

1. What unique benefits can traditional travel agents offer to customers which online travel agencies cannot offer?
2. What advantages do travel agents have in the eyes of the customers?
3. How have online travel agencies affected your business over the years?
4. What type of challenges do you face on a daily basis in relation to online travel agencies?
5. How do you handle the challenge of keeping up with the costs of packages from the prices offered by online travel agencies?

Appendix 4: Questionnaire Matrix

Question	Aims & Objective/s	Connection to Literature Review The literature review says that...
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Age Group • How many trips do you take a year? 	<p>Investigating the factors that influence the traveller's choice</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The decision-making process may vary from one traveller to another especially since factors such as brand loyalty, consumer behaviour, and age may influence their decisions (Chia, 2018). On the contrary, Liao (2020) argues that it is the value of a product or service that drives travellers to choose one product over the other and thus, it is the traveller's preference for TTAs or OTAs stems from their inherent value. • Researchers determined that the most crucial factors which influence the traveller's decision to book with a TTA are efficiency, expertise, individualised service, and access to information with regards to hidden costs. Additional research has revealed the main benefits for booking with travel agencies are the expertise of the staff, the dependability, time saved, knowledge of the travel agents, personal counselling, special offers, and social interactions. (Seocanac, et al., 2019)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have you ever heard of traditional travel agencies? • Have you ever heard of online travel agencies such as Booking.com, Expedia? • Have you ever booked through a traditional travel Agency? • Have you ever booked through an online travel agency? • Mention some reasons why you have booked through a traditional travel agency. • Mention some reasons why you have booked through an online travel agency. • Which type of agency do you book through the most? 	<p>Determine the booking preference</p>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When booking a trip, what services do you normally require assistance with? • What benefits of online travel agencies are considered important for you? • What benefits of traditional travel agencies are considered important for you? • Do you trust the accuracy and reliability of information provided by online travel agencies? • Have you ever encountered any issues or concerns when booking through online travel agencies? • If yes, Have such issues or concerns affected your preferred method of booking nowadays? 	<p>Analyse the advantages and disadvantages of TTAs and OTAs & Investigating the factors that influence the traveller's choice</p>	

Question	Aims & Objective/s	Connection to Literature Review The literature review says that...
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have you ever encountered any issues or concerns when booking through a traditional travel agency? • If yes, Have such issues or concerns affected your preferred method of booking nowadays? • Are there any types of trips where you prefer using online travel agencies rather than traditional travel agencies? (Example: One prefers using traditional travel agencies for family trips whilst using online travel agencies for business trips) 	<p>Determine the booking preference</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Park, et al. (2019) identifies that travellers tend to prefer purchasing products from websites that provide them with substantial information and allow them to assess the quality of the product. On the contrary, Chia (2018) states that this depends on factors such as as consumer behaviours and consumer characteristics.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Please feel free to leave any comments you would like to add about your travel preferences. 		

Appendix 5: Interview Matrix

Question	Aims & Objective/s	Connection to Literature Review The literature review says that...
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What unique benefits can traditional travel agents offer to customers which online travel agencies cannot offer? • What advantages do travel agents have in the eyes of the customers? 	<p>Investigating the factors that influence the traveller's choice & Analyse the advantages and disadvantages of TTAs</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Due to the recent changes, travellers nowadays do not necessarily have to visit an agency to make travel arrangements. As the uptake and use of technology has accelerated the disintermediation of TTAs. TTAs need to reaffirm their role if they are to withstand the disintermediation and remain competitive in the tourism industry. (Munikrishnan & Mamun, 2021)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How have online travel agencies affected your business over the years? • What type of challenges do you face on a daily basis in relation to online travel agencies? • How do you handle the challenge of keeping up with the costs of packages from the prices offered by online travel agencies? 	<p>Define and Characterise TTAs & Analyse the advantages and disadvantages of TTAs</p>	

Appendix 6: Interview Participant Forms – Participant A

Consent Form



Name and Surname of Researcher: Kayleigh Portelli

ID number of researcher: 220402L

Email address of researcher: kayleigh.portelli001@its.edu.mt

Mobile number of researcher: (+356) 79252420

Course: Bachelor's in International Hospitality Management

Tutor name and surname: Fiorentina Darmania Jochimsen

Tutor office telephone number: +356 2379 3160

Title of the Dissertation: Advantages and Disadvantages of Traditional vs Online Travel Agencies

Dear Sir / Madam,

I, Kayleigh Portelli, a student at the Institute of Tourism Studies am currently in the final year of my bachelor's degree, I am carrying out research on the above-mentioned title.

I had already sent you the information letter about my research and you had provided me with a signed information letter. If you have any further questions for clarification, please do not hesitate to ask me.

By signing this consent form, you are giving me your consent to use the data collected through the interview for the analysis of the results. I will send you a list of questions before the interview so you can prepare yourself beforehand. The questions asked will be about traditional and online travel agencies.

The information collected will be kept strictly confidential. All data will be stored securely and will be made available only to those individuals conducting the study. No reference will be made in oral or written reports that could link you to the study. Your identity will not be revealed in any publications that result from this study.

You can terminate your participation at any time without prejudice. Participation is voluntary. You do not have to answer individual questions if you do not want to. Your name will not be attached to the interview and will ensure that your participation remains confidential. Kindly, contact me if you have any queries or require any further clarification.

Participant's declaration

I have read this consent form and am giving the researcher the opportunity to carry out the research at my company. I hereby grant them permission to use the information provided as data in the above-mentioned research project, knowing that it will be kept confidential and anonymous.

Participant A _____ Participant's Name	 _____ Participant's Signature	27/02/24 _____ Date
Kayleigh Portelli _____ Researcher's Name	<i>K. Portelli</i> _____ Researcher's Signature	22/02/2024 _____ Date

Information Letter



Name and Surname of Researcher: Kayleigh Portelli

ID number of researcher: 220402L

Email address of researcher: kayleigh.portelli001@its.edu.mt

Mobile number of researcher: (+356)79252420

Course: Bachelor's in International Hospitality Management

Tutor name and surname: Fiorentina Darmania Jochimsen

Tutor office telephone number: +356 2379 3160

Title of the Long essay/Dissertation: Advantages and Disadvantages of Traditional vs Online Travel Agencies

Aims of the research: To investigate the advantages and disadvantages of TTAs in comparison to OTAs while also determining the booking preference of the Maltese population.

Dear Sir / Madam,

I, Kayleigh Portelli, a student at the Institute of Tourism Studies am currently in the final year of my Bachelor's in International Hospitality Management, I am carrying out research on the above-mentioned title.

My research is about the advantages and disadvantages of traditional versus online travel agencies. The method of data collection will be an interview. The data collected from the interview will be used for the sole purpose of this research. The data will be collected by asking questions in an audio recorded face-to-face interview at your esteemed company. The data will be collected in a content analysis and will be transcribed. The data will be thoroughly analysed to collect the answers to the above-mentioned aims of the research. I am kindly asking for your consent to have a face-to-face interview with you. The purpose of this letter is to provide you with information so you can decide whether to participate in this study. Any questions you may have will be answered by the researcher.

There are no known risks related with this research project other than possible discomfort with the following:

- You will be kindly asked to be honest when answering questions.
- Any audio recorded data will be used for transcription purposes, after which it will be destroyed.

The information collected will be kept strictly confidential. All data will be stored securely and will be made available only to researcher. No reference will be made in oral or written reports that could link you to the study. Your identity will not be revealed in any publications that result from this study.

You can terminate your participation at any time without prejudice. Participation is voluntary. You do not have to answer individual questions if you do not want to. Your name or the name of your company will not be attached to the analysis of the results. and will ensure that your participation remains confidential. Kindly, contact me if you have any queries or require any further clarification.

Participant's declaration

I have read this consent form and am giving the researcher the opportunity to carry out the research at my company. I hereby grant them permission to use the information provided as data in the above-mentioned research project, knowing that it will be kept confidential and anonymous.

Participant A _____ Participant's Name	 _____ Participant's Signature	27/02/24 _____ Date
Kayleigh Portelli _____ Researcher's Name	<i>K. Portelli</i> _____ Researcher's Signature	22/02/2024 _____ Date

Permission Letter



Name and Surname of Researcher: Kayleigh Portelli

ID number of researcher: 220402L

Email address of researcher: kayleigh.portelli001@its.edu.mt

Mobile number of researcher: (+356) 79252420

Course: Bachelor's in International Hospitality Management

Tutor name and surname: Fiorentina Darmania Jochimsen

Tutor office telephone number: +356 2379 3160

Title of the Dissertation: The Advantages and Disadvantages of Traditional vs Online Travel Agencies

Aims of the research: To investigate the advantages and disadvantages of TTAs in comparison to OTAs while also determining the booking preference of the Maltese population. This includes defining and characterising traditional and online travel agencies, collecting data to determine the booking preference of the Maltese population and investigating the factors that influence the choice of the travellers.

Type of participants: Managing Director

Number of participants required: 1

Dear Sir / Madam,

I, Kayleigh Portelli, a student at the Institute of Tourism Studies am currently in the final year of my Bachelor's Degree, I am carrying out research on the above-mentioned title.

I would like your permission to discuss the advantages and disadvantages of traditional and online travel agencies and how these effect each other. Specifically focusing on the benefits that traditional travel agencies offer in the customer's eyes. The purpose of this letter is to provide you with information so you can decide whether to participate in this study. Any questions you may have will be answered by the researcher.

There are no known risks related with this research project other than possible discomfort with the following:

- Everyone will be asked to be honest when answering questions.
- Any audio recorded data will be used for transcription purposes, after which it will be destroyed.

The information in the study records will be kept strictly confidential. All data will be stored securely and will be made available only to those individuals conducting the study. No reference will be made in oral or written reports that could link you to the study. Your identity and the identity of the participants will not be revealed in any publications that result from this study.

Participants can terminate their participation at any time without prejudice. Participation is voluntary. Participants do not have to answer individual questions if they do not want to. Your name and the participant's names will not be attached to the interview, and this will ensure that everyone's information remains confidential. Please, kindly contact me if you have any queries or any further information or clarification.

Participant's declaration

I have read this consent form and am giving the researcher the opportunity to carry out the research at my company. I hereby grant them permission to use the information provided as data in the above-mentioned research project, knowing that it will be kept confidential and anonymous.

Participant A _____ Participant's Name	 _____ Participant's Signature	27/02/24 _____ Date
Kayleigh Portelli _____ Researcher's Name	 _____ Researcher's Signature	22/02/2024 _____ Date

Appendix 7: Interview Participant Forms – Participant B

Consent Form



Name and Surname of Researcher: Kayleigh Portelli

ID number of researcher: 220402L

Email address of researcher: kayleigh.portelli001@its.edu.mt

Mobile number of researcher: (+356) 79252420

Course: Bachelor's in International Hospitality Management

Tutor name and surname: Fiorentina Darmania Jochimsen

Tutor office telephone number: +356 2379 3160

Title of the Dissertation: Advantages and Disadvantages of Traditional vs Online Travel Agencies

Dear Sir / Madam,

I, Kayleigh Portelli, a student at the Institute of Tourism Studies am currently in the final year of my bachelor's degree, I am carrying out research on the above-mentioned title.

I had already sent you the information letter about my research and you had provided me with a signed information letter. If you have any further questions for clarification, please do not hesitate to ask me.

By signing this consent form, you are giving me your consent to use the data collected through the interview for the analysis of the results. I will send you a list of questions before the interview so you can prepare yourself beforehand. The questions asked will be about traditional and online travel agencies.

The information collected will be kept strictly confidential. All data will be stored securely and will be made available only to those individuals conducting the study. No reference will be made in oral or written reports that could link you to the study. Your identity will not be revealed in any publications that result from this study.

You can terminate your participation at any time without prejudice. Participation is voluntary. You do not have to answer individual questions if you do not want to. Your name will not be attached to the interview and will ensure that your participation remains confidential. Kindly, contact me if you have any queries or require any further clarification.

Participant’s declaration

I have read this consent form and am giving the researcher the opportunity to carry out the research at my company. I hereby grant them permission to use the information provided as data in the above-mentioned research project, knowing that it will be kept confidential and anonymous.

<u>Participant B</u> Participant’s Name	 Participant’s Signature	<u>11/03/2024</u> Date
<u>Kayleigh Portelli</u> Researcher’s Name	<u>K. Portelli</u> Researcher’s Signature	<u>11/03/2024</u> Date

Information Letter



Name and Surname of Researcher: Kayleigh Portelli

ID number of researcher: 220402L

Email address of researcher: kayleigh.portelli001@its.edu.mt

Mobile number of researcher: (+356)79252420

Course: Bachelor's in International Hospitality Management

Tutor name and surname: Fiorentina Darmania Jochimsen

Tutor office telephone number: +356 2379 3160

Title of the Long essay/Dissertation: Advantages and Disadvantages of Traditional vs Online Travel Agencies

Aims of the research: To investigate the advantages and disadvantages of TTAs in comparison to OTAs while also determining the booking preference of the Maltese population.

Dear Sir / Madam,

I, Kayleigh Portelli, a student at the Institute of Tourism Studies am currently in the final year of my Bachelor's in International Hospitality Management, I am carrying out research on the above-mentioned title.

My research is about the advantages and disadvantages of traditional versus online travel agencies. The method of data collection will be an interview. The data collected from the interview will be used for the sole purpose of this research. The data will be collected by asking questions in an audio recorded face-to-face interview at your esteemed company. The data will be collected in a content analysis and will be transcribed. The data will be thoroughly analysed to collect the answers to the above-mentioned aims of the research. I am kindly asking for your consent to have a face-to-face interview with you. The purpose of this letter is to provide you with information so you can decide whether to participate in this study. Any questions you may have will be answered by the researcher.

There are no known risks related with this research project other than possible discomfort with the following:

- You will be kindly asked to be honest when answering questions.
- Any audio recorded data will be used for transcription purposes, after which it will be destroyed.

The information collected will be kept strictly confidential. All data will be stored securely and will be made available only to researcher. No reference will be made in oral or written reports that could link you to the study. Your identity will not be revealed in any publications that result from this study.

You can terminate your participation at any time without prejudice. Participation is voluntary. You do not have to answer individual questions if you do not want to. Your name or the name of your company will not be attached to the analysis of the results. and will ensure that your participation remains confidential. Kindly, contact me if you have any queries or require any further clarification.

Participant’s declaration

I have read this consent form and am giving the researcher the opportunity to carry out the research at my company. I hereby grant them permission to use the information provided as data in the above-mentioned research project, knowing that it will be kept confidential and anonymous.

Participant B <hr/> Participant’s Name	 <hr/> Participant’s Signature	11/03/2024 <hr/> Date
Kayleigh Portelli <hr/> Researcher’s Name	<i>K. Portelli</i> <hr/> Researcher’s Signature	11/03/2024 <hr/> Date

Permission Letter



Name and Surname of Researcher: Kayleigh Portelli

ID number of researcher: 220402L

Email address of researcher: kayleigh.portelli001@its.edu.mt

Mobile number of researcher: (+356) 79252420

Course: Bachelor's in International Hospitality Management

Tutor name and surname: Fiorentina Darmania Jochimsen

Tutor office telephone number: +356 2379 3160

Title of the Dissertation: The Advantages and Disadvantages of Traditional vs Online Travel

Agencies

Aims of the research: To investigate the advantages and disadvantages of TTAs in comparison to OTAs while also determining the booking preference of the Maltese population. This includes defining and characterising traditional and online travel agencies, collecting data to determine the booking preference of the Maltese population and investigating the factors that influence the choice of the travellers.

Type of participants: Managing Director

Number of participants required: 1

Dear Sir / Madam,

I, Kayleigh Portelli, a student at the Institute of Tourism Studies am currently in the final year of my Bachelor's Degree, I am carrying out research on the above-mentioned title.

I would like your permission to discuss the advantages and disadvantages of traditional and online travel agencies and how these effect each other. Specifically focusing on the benefits that traditional travel agencies offer in the customer's eyes. The purpose of this letter is to provide you with information so you can decide whether to participate in this study. Any questions you may have will be answered by the researcher.

There are no known risks related with this research project other than possible discomfort with the following:

- Everyone will be asked to be honest when answering questions.
- Any audio recorded data will be used for transcription purposes, after which it will be destroyed.

The information in the study records will be kept strictly confidential. All data will be stored securely and will be made available only to those individuals conducting the study. No reference will be made in oral or written reports that could link you to the study. Your identity and the identity of the participants will not be revealed in any publications that result from this study.

Participants can terminate their participation at any time without prejudice. Participation is voluntary. Participants do not have to answer individual questions if they do not want to. Your name and the participant's names will not be attached to the interview, and this will ensure that everyone's information remains confidential. Please, kindly contact me if you have any queries or any further information or clarification.

Participant's declaration

I have read this consent form and am giving the researcher the opportunity to carry out the research at my company. I hereby grant them permission to use the information provided as data in the above-mentioned research project, knowing that it will be kept confidential and anonymous.

Participant B <hr/> Participant's Name	 <hr/> Participant's Signature	11/03/2024 <hr/> Date
Kayleigh Portelli <hr/> Researcher's Name	<i>K. Portelli</i> <hr/> Researcher's Signature	11/03/2024 <hr/> Date

Appendix 8: Interview Participant Forms – Participant C

Consent Form



Name and Surname of Researcher: Kayleigh Portelli

ID number of researcher: 220402L

Email address of researcher: kayleigh.portelli001@its.edu.mt

Mobile number of researcher: (+356) 79252420

Course: Bachelor's in International Hospitality Management

Tutor name and surname: Fiorentina Darmania Jochimsen

Tutor office telephone number: +356 2379 3160

Title of the Dissertation: Advantages and Disadvantages of Traditional vs Online Travel Agencies

Dear Sir / Madam,

I, Kayleigh Portelli, a student at the Institute of Tourism Studies am currently in the final year of my bachelor's degree, I am carrying out research on the above-mentioned title.

I had already sent you the information letter about my research and you had provided me with a signed information letter. If you have any further questions for clarification, please do not hesitate to ask me.

By signing this consent form, you are giving me your consent to use the data collected through the interview for the analysis of the results. I will send you a list of questions before the interview so you can prepare yourself beforehand. The questions asked will be about traditional and online travel agencies.

The information collected will be kept strictly confidential. All data will be stored securely and will be made available only to those individuals conducting the study. No reference will be made in oral or written reports that could link you to the study. Your identity will not be revealed in any publications that result from this study.

You can terminate your participation at any time without prejudice. Participation is voluntary. You do not have to answer individual questions if you do not want to. Your name will not be attached to the interview and will ensure that your participation remains confidential. Kindly, contact me if you have any queries or require any further clarification.

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<u>Participant C</u> Participant’s Name	 Participant’s Signature	<u>15/03/2024</u> Date
<u>Kayleigh Portelli</u> Researcher’s Name	<u>K. Portelli</u> Researcher’s Signature	<u>15/03/2024</u> Date

Information Letter



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Mobile number of researcher: (+356)79252420

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<u>Kayleigh Portelli</u> Researcher’s Name	<u>K. Portelli</u> Researcher’s Signature	<u>15/03/2024</u> Date

Permission Letter



Name and Surname of Researcher: Kayleigh Portelli

ID number of researcher: 220402L

Email address of researcher: kayleigh.portelli001@its.edu.mt

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Type of participants: Managing Director

Number of participants required: 1

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Kayleigh Portelli <hr/> Researcher's Name	<i>K. Portelli</i> <hr/> Researcher's Signature	15/03/2024 <hr/> Date