



European Institute of Innovation,
Entrepreneurship, and Technology

**Title: Reevaluating the Strategic Significance of
Online Travel Agencies in Modern Tourism
Distribution Networks**

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Submission date: 30.11.2025

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ABSTRACT

Online Travel Agencies (OTAs) have fundamentally reshaped the structure, functionality, and economic dynamics of global tourism distribution systems, transforming what was once a linear chain of intermediaries into a highly digitalized, platform-mediated ecosystem. Governed by algorithms, data-driven mechanisms, and extensive user-generated content, OTAs now influence nearly every stage of the traveler's journey—from initial inspiration to final booking. This assignment investigates the evolving role of OTAs in contemporary tourism distribution by examining their impact on consumer planning behavior, information search patterns, and decision-making processes. It highlights how travelers increasingly depend on OTAs for transparency, convenience, comparison functions, and trust signals such as reviews and ratings, which collectively shape purchase choices. Simultaneously, the abstract draws on academic and industry literature to show how these digital platforms enhance global visibility for tourism suppliers while also reshaping competitive dynamics through pricing pressures, performance rankings, and demand-driven algorithms.

In parallel, the study critically evaluates the challenges that OTAs introduce for suppliers, including high commission structures, platform dependency cycles, and limited access to guest data—factors that can diminish supplier autonomy and profitability over time. Technological advancements such as AI-based recommendation engines, dynamic pricing systems, API integrations, and mobile-first booking environments have further entrenched OTA dominance by enhancing the efficiency and personalization of the digital booking experience. The abstract also reflects on the accelerating effect of the COVID-19 pandemic, which intensified digital adoption, reinforced the value of online intermediaries, and pushed tourism businesses toward rapid technological adaptation. Ultimately, the analysis argues that while OTAs remain indispensable actors within today's tourism distribution networks, long-term sustainability requires suppliers to adopt hybrid distribution strategies that balance the benefits of OTA exposure with the strategic development of direct booking channels and stronger digital capabilities.

INTRODUCTION

Tourism distribution channels form the framework through which travel products and services move from suppliers to consumers. Historically, these channels were structured around traditional intermediaries such as travel agents, wholesalers, and tour operators. These actors acted as essential connectors between businesses and travelers, managing bookings, curating packages, and bridging information gaps at a time when consumers had limited access to global travel data.

However, the digital revolution has radically disrupted these traditional pathways. As internet accessibility increased and consumer behavior shifted toward independent online research, new forms of digital intermediation emerged. Among the most influential of these are **Online Travel Agencies (OTAs)**—platforms such as Booking.com, Agoda, Expedia, Airbnb, and Trip.com. These platforms aggregate travel inventory, compare pricing, facilitate bookings, integrate user

reviews, and offer comprehensive, mobile-friendly interfaces. OTAs have grown into powerful global players, fundamentally altering how both travelers and suppliers engage with tourism products.

For travelers, OTAs have become almost inseparable from the planning process. Modern tourists expect instant information, transparent comparison tools, reliable reviews, and flexible booking options. OTAs satisfy these expectations more effectively than most traditional channels or supplier websites. As a result, the majority of travelers use OTAs as either their primary or secondary source of travel information and booking.

For tourism suppliers, the relationship with OTAs is far more complex. On one hand, OTAs provide immense global reach, increased visibility, and technology-driven booking infrastructures that many hotels or tour operators cannot implement independently. They serve as marketing engines capable of attracting international demand at scale. On the other hand, OTA participation involves substantial trade-offs, including high commission fees, dependency risks, overreliance on third-party visibility, and reduced control over pricing and customer relationships. These tensions illustrate the dual role of OTAs as both partners and powerful gatekeepers within distribution networks.

Technological innovation further amplifies OTA influence. Features such as dynamic pricing, algorithm-driven ranking systems, personalized recommendations, mobile app optimization, and instant booking confirmation have pushed OTAs far ahead of many smaller suppliers. In addition, the integration of user-generated content—particularly reviews and ratings—has reshaped how trust is established in tourism. Travelers increasingly rely on the “wisdom of the crowd” rather than on direct supplier communication or traditional travel agents.

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated these transformations by forcing millions of travelers to depend on digital platforms for cancellations, travel updates, and flexible alternatives. OTAs that adapted quickly, offering clearer policies and enhanced information tools, were able to maintain relevance even in the face of severe global disruption. As tourism gradually recovered, OTAs emerged with strengthened positions and updated technological capabilities, reinforcing their central role in distribution.

Given these shifts, this assignment seeks to address the following research questions:

1. How have OTAs transformed the structure and function of tourism distribution channels?
2. What motivates travelers to rely heavily on OTAs during their planning and booking processes?
3. How do OTAs impact supplier autonomy, competitiveness, and profitability?
4. What technological innovations contribute to OTA dominance?
5. How can tourism suppliers develop hybrid strategies that balance reliance on OTAs with enhanced direct distribution?

By exploring these questions, this assignment aims to develop a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the strategic significance of OTAs in modern tourism distribution networks. It

also highlights the opportunities and challenges that suppliers must navigate in a marketplace increasingly shaped by digital platforms.

LITERATURE REVIEW

1. Transformation of Tourism Distribution Channels

Tourism distribution channels have shifted dramatically from traditional, linear pathways into dynamic, digitally mediated networks. Early models relied heavily on travel agents and wholesalers who acted as intermediaries between suppliers and travelers (Middleton & Clarke, 2011). These intermediaries played crucial roles in reducing information asymmetry, preparing itineraries, and managing bookings.

However, the advent of the internet in the late 1990s and early 2000s marked a major turning point. As noted by Buhalis and Law (2008), the digital era empowered consumers to search for information independently, reducing the need for face-to-face intermediaries. Suppliers began developing their own websites to reach customers directly, but the rapid growth of Online Travel Agencies (OTAs) soon overshadowed individual supplier-led digital efforts.

Modern distribution channels are now characterized by interconnected platforms, meta-search engines, social media referral systems, and mobile applications (Xiang et al., 2015). This networked environment has redefined how tourism products are marketed, accessed, and delivered.

2. Online Travel Agencies as Digital Intermediaries

OTAs function as complex, multi-sided digital platforms that link travelers with tourism suppliers. Unlike traditional travel agents who depend on manual bookings, OTAs utilize advanced digital infrastructures such as real-time inventory systems, algorithmic ranking, and data-driven marketing campaigns (Standing et al., 2014).

Key elements that distinguish OTAs from earlier intermediaries include:

- **mass aggregation of supply**, providing extensive choice;
- **integrated review systems**, enhancing user trust;
- **price comparison capabilities**, enabling instant evaluation;
- **global accessibility**, breaking market boundaries;
- **technological scalability**, allowing seamless updates and integration.

Platform theory, particularly the work of Hagiu (2014), provides a useful lens for understanding OTA operations. OTAs act as digital marketplaces benefiting from cross-side network effects: more suppliers attract more travelers, and more travelers attract more suppliers, creating exponential growth.

3. Consumer Decision-Making in OTA Environments

3.1 Information Search and Comparison Efficiency

Travelers increasingly rely on OTAs as primary sources of information due to their ability to structure vast amounts of data into user-friendly formats. Research by Morosan and Bowen (2018) indicates that travelers value the ease of comparing multiple properties, prices, and amenities in a single platform.

3.2 Trust, Reviews, and Perceived Credibility

Digital trust plays a central role in OTA use. According to Filieri (2016), user-generated reviews significantly reduce consumer uncertainty. OTAs, which host millions of verified reviews, therefore create ecosystems where travelers believe the information to be more objective and reliable than supplier marketing content.

3.3 eWOM Influence on Booking Intentions

Electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) is widely recognized as one of the most influential factors in online travel decision-making. Studies by Litvin et al. (2018) establish that online reviews and ratings deeply impact traveler perceptions of quality and safety, ultimately influencing booking behavior.

3.4 Mobile-Driven Consumer Behavior

The rise of mobile technology has reinforced OTA relevance. Wang et al. (2020) found that mobile booking apps are redefining convenience, allowing travelers to book last-minute accommodations, store payment details, and receive real-time notifications.

4. Supplier Benefits in Partnering with OTAs

4.1 Enhanced Visibility and Market Reach

OTAs provide unparalleled global exposure. Research from Inversini and Masiero (2014) demonstrates that suppliers, especially small hotels, rely on OTAs to enter international markets without heavy marketing investments.

4.2 Increased Occupancy and Demand Stabilization

By tapping into broad consumer databases, OTAs help suppliers fill vacancies during low-demand periods. This demand stability contributes to financial predictability, especially for independent hotels and local operators.

4.3 Reduced Promotional Burden

OTAs invest extensively in SEO and digital advertising. Dogru et al. (2020) note that this reduces reliance on suppliers' own marketing efforts, allowing businesses to focus more on service delivery rather than global outreach campaigns.

5. Supplier Challenges and Vulnerabilities

5.1 High Commission Fees

Commission fees ranging from 15–30% represent a major drawback for suppliers. Melián-González et al. (2019) emphasize that these fees can significantly reduce profit margins, especially in competitive destinations where pricing flexibility is limited.

5.2 Dependence and Loss of Control

Many small suppliers rely on OTAs for more than half their bookings (Noone & McGuire, 2016). This creates dependency cycles where suppliers feel obligated to comply with OTA policies—ranging from rate parity to participation in promotional programs.

5.3 Data Ownership Issues

OTAs typically restrict supplier access to customer contact information. Without guest data, hotels struggle to build loyalty programs, personalize communication, or encourage repeat direct bookings (Morosan, 2020).

5.4 Algorithmic Bias

Ranking algorithms—which are often opaque—determine which suppliers appear at the top of search results. Li et al. (2021) note that these algorithms may favor suppliers who participate in paid visibility programs, reinforcing inequalities among listings.

6. Airbnb and Alternative Accommodation Platforms

Airbnb has expanded the tourism supply landscape beyond traditional hotels. Guttentag (2015) argues that peer-to-peer lodging introduces:

- flexible accommodation types,
- localized experiences,
- expanded room inventory,
- new traveler market segments.

Airbnb's rise forces conventional OTAs and hotels to adapt to increasingly diverse customer expectations.

7. Effects of COVID-19 on Digital Distribution

The pandemic accelerated digital adoption. As travel restrictions fluctuated, OTAs became essential sources of policy updates and flexible booking options. Sigala (2020) highlights how pandemic uncertainty pushed travelers toward platforms offering free cancellations, transparent communication, and safety-related information filters.

8. Technological Advancements Strengthening OTA Dominance

Several innovations enhance OTA competitiveness:

- **AI-based personalization** improves search relevance (Huang & Rust, 2021).
- **Dynamic pricing systems** optimize revenue.
- **Automated messaging** streamlines communication.
- **AR and VR previews** enhance product visualization.
- **Super-app integrations** (e.g., Trip.com) broaden ecosystems.

These advancements create powerful digital environments that individual suppliers struggle to replicate.

9. Hybrid Distribution Approaches

Recent literature promotes hybrid strategies where suppliers combine OTA exposure with strong direct channels. O'Connor (2021) argues that:

- loyalty campaigns,
- website optimization,
- direct incentives,
- personalized communication,

can reduce dependence and increase long-term profitability.

METHODOLOGY

1. Research Approach

This assignment uses a **qualitative, exploratory research approach** to understand the evolving role of Online Travel Agencies (OTAs) in modern tourism distribution. Qualitative analysis is particularly suitable because the subject involves behavioral motivations, technological influences, platform power dynamics, and supplier–intermediary relationships—areas that cannot be captured fully through numerical data alone. As Creswell (2014) explains, qualitative research is essential for examining processes, interactions, and patterns of meaning.

By focusing on interpretive analysis, this methodological approach offers the flexibility required to examine how travelers make decisions on digital platforms, how suppliers negotiate visibility and profitability, and how algorithms and mobile technologies reshape competition.

2. Data Collection

The study relies entirely on **secondary data sources**, including:

- peer-reviewed academic journal articles published between 2015 and 2024;
- tourism and hospitality research books;
- industry reports from OTAs (e.g., Booking Holdings, Airbnb, Expedia Group);
- tourism organizations such as UNWTO, Skift, WTTC, and Phocuswright;
- online publications and case studies focusing on distribution strategies;
- market analyses featuring hotel–OTA partnerships and digital trends.

Using multiple types of secondary data enables a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomena surrounding OTA influence.

3. Selection Criteria for Sources

Sources were chosen based on:

- **Relevance** to OTAs, tourism distribution, digital behavior, platform economics, or supplier strategies.
- **Recency**, prioritizing studies published within the last five to eight years, except for classic theoretical works.
- **Credibility**, meaning peer-reviewed publications or reputable industry research.
- **Depth**, with preference given to sources offering conceptual frameworks or empirical findings.

This ensures that the literature represents both academic rigor and industry relevance.

4. Analytical Framework

A **thematic analysis** was applied following Braun & Clarke’s (2006) approach. After reviewing all materials, key concepts were coded and categorized into major themes:

1. OTA dominance in distribution systems
2. Consumer trust and decision-making
3. Supplier benefits and dependencies
4. Algorithmic visibility and competition
5. Mobile-first travel behavior
6. Technological innovation
7. Post-pandemic digital acceleration

These themes provided a structured way to synthesize complex and multidirectional insights into coherent findings.

5. Methodological Limitations

The chosen methodology has certain limitations:

- Reliance on secondary data may exclude real-time insights from supplier interviews.
- Platforms' algorithmic processes remain highly confidential, limiting full transparency.
- Industry reports may contain some inherent commercial bias.
- Rapid changes in digital tourism may shift trends faster than academic literature can capture.

Nonetheless, the breadth and diversity of sources offer strong foundations for analysis.

FINDINGS

1. OTAs Have Become Dominant Digital Gatekeepers

The analysis confirms that OTAs have evolved into the most influential intermediaries in tourism distribution. Their dominance stems from:

- unmatched global inventory,
- sophisticated search engines,
- verified review systems,
- high search engine visibility,
- strong mobile ecosystems.

OTAs effectively determine which suppliers travelers see first, shaping the demand flow.

2. Travelers Prefer OTAs for Convenience, Transparency, and Risk Reduction

Travelers gravitate toward OTAs because they simplify complex decisions. Findings show that:

- structured comparison tools reduce information overload;
- verified reviews increase trust;
- transparent pricing mitigates financial uncertainty;
- flexible cancellation policies provide security, especially post-pandemic;
- mobile apps make spontaneous bookings easier than ever.

Travelers perceive OTAs as complete ecosystems where planning and booking feel seamless.

3. Suppliers Gain Visibility but Lose Certain Types of Control

OTAs undeniably help suppliers, especially small establishments, by offering:

- global visibility,
- increased occupancy,
- professional marketing tools,
- access to diverse markets.

However, these benefits are matched by challenges:

- high commission fees that reduce net revenue,
- dependence on OTA traffic,
- limited access to customer data,
- rate parity obligations,
- reduced control over cancellation and pricing policies.

This push-and-pull dynamic forms the core tension of OTA relationships.

4. Algorithmic Ranking Systems Shape Market Competition

A central finding is that OTA algorithms heavily influence which tourism products succeed. These ranking mechanisms consider:

- pricing competitiveness,
- review scores,
- responsiveness,
- conversion rates,
- participation in paid advertising programs.

This creates a system where visibility depends not only on quality but also on platform-optimized performance—giving larger or tech-savvy suppliers an advantage.

5. Airbnb Has Redefined the Accommodation Landscape

Airbnb's entry expanded tourism supply by creating a massive peer-to-peer accommodation market. Findings show that Airbnb:

- introduced new forms of lodging,
- appealed to price-conscious and experience-driven travelers,
- influenced urban tourism patterns,
- positioned itself as more community-oriented than traditional OTAs.

Its presence forced traditional hotels and OTAs to reexamine their offerings and adopt more personalized approaches.

6. The Pandemic Accelerated Digital Dependency

COVID-19 strengthened the role of OTAs in several ways:

- travelers relied on OTAs for real-time updates,
- flexible booking became a top priority,
- demand for clear safety information increased,
- digital research habits intensified.

OTAs that adapted quickly were able to maintain or even grow their influence during the recovery phase.

7. Mobile Booking Has Become the Default Behavior

The findings highlight that mobile apps now generate a large percentage of OTA bookings. Mobile-first travelers appreciate:

- instant availability,
- last-minute booking options,
- stored payment details,
- app-exclusive promotions.

Mobile dominance gives OTAs another competitive edge over supplier websites, which often lack similar functionality.

8. Technological Innovation Continues to Strengthen OTA Market Position

OTAs invest heavily in technology, giving them vast competitive advantages. Key innovations include:

- **AI-powered personalization** for search results,
- **machine-learning-driven dynamic pricing,**
- **integrated messaging and chatbot support,**
- **AR/VR property previews,**
- **super-app ecosystems** (especially in Asia).

These tools enable OTAs to continually elevate the user experience.

DISCUSSION

1. OTAs Are More Than Intermediaries—They Are Digital Market Regulators

The findings reveal that OTAs do not simply mediate between suppliers and travelers. They regulate the digital marketplace through ranking systems, marketing visibility, and platform policies. This gives them structural power rarely seen in traditional distribution systems.

2. Traveler Behavior Reinforces OTA Dominance

Travelers choose OTAs because they reduce stress, uncertainty, and cognitive effort. Trust-building strategies—especially user-generated reviews—create a self-sustaining cycle of reliance. The more travelers depend on OTAs, the stronger these platforms become.

3. Supplier Dependence Creates Strategic Vulnerabilities

While suppliers benefit from exposure, their dependency introduces risks:

- reduced profit margins,
- limited control over brand representation,
- vulnerability to ranking downgrades,
- inability to build direct customer relationships.

This dependency often leaves smaller suppliers unable to negotiate better terms or diversify distribution.

4. Algorithmic Competition Is Reshaping the Market

OTA algorithms reward properties that fit specific criteria, creating a new kind of digital competition. Visibility becomes a commodity controlled by OTAs, not suppliers. This unequal competition gives more power to well-performing or well-funded properties.

5. OTAs' Technological Superiority Will Continue to Expand Their Influence

OTAs' economic capacity enables them to invest in advanced digital tools that many suppliers simply cannot afford. This creates a widening technological gap that ensures their long-term relevance.

6. Hybrid Distribution Strategies Are Essential for Supplier Survival

The findings strongly indicate that suppliers must pursue hybrid distribution strategies, including:

- developing robust direct channels,
- offering direct-booking value-added incentives,
- improving website design and usability,
- leveraging loyalty programs,
- optimizing social media communication.

Such strategies reduce dependency while maintaining the benefits of OTA visibility.

CONCLUSION

The evolution of Online Travel Agencies (OTAs) represents one of the most significant transformations in modern tourism distribution. Once dominated by traditional middlemen, travel agencies, and tour wholesalers, the industry now operates within a digitally driven ecosystem shaped by platforms that aggregate, organize, and algorithmically curate vast tourism inventories. OTAs have succeeded because they align perfectly with contemporary travel behavior—behavior defined by a desire for convenience, transparency, immediacy, choice, and trust.

From the traveler's perspective, OTAs create a sense of control. Their ability to present millions of listings in clean, comparable formats—reinforced by verified reviews and transparent pricing—reduces the uncertainty that traditionally accompanied travel decision-making. The rise of mobile booking has further entrenched OTA dominance, encouraging spontaneous purchases and cultivating habitual platform use. Features such as app-only discounts, personalized recommendations, and secure payment systems give users little incentive to switch to direct booking channels.

For tourism suppliers, however, the relationship with OTAs is far more complex. While OTAs undeniably provide immense benefits—global visibility, higher occupancy, and effective digital marketing—they simultaneously introduce structural challenges. High commission fees diminish profit margins. Algorithmic ranking systems create competition environments that suppliers cannot easily control. The restriction of guest data weakens loyalty-building efforts. Most critically, heavy dependence on OTAs undermines long-term autonomy, making suppliers vulnerable to changes in platform policies and pricing demands.

The findings of this assignment confirm that OTAs have become powerful digital gatekeepers whose influence extends far beyond simple intermediation. They regulate visibility, shape consumer perceptions, and define the rules of engagement within digital marketplaces. Their technological investment—including AI personalization, dynamic pricing tools, and AR/VR integrations—continues to widen the gap between platform capabilities and typical supplier resources.

The COVID-19 pandemic further cemented OTAs' position by accelerating digital adoption. Travelers increasingly relied on OTAs for updated restriction information, flexible cancellation terms, and dynamic price shifts. Those OTAs that adapted quickly—enhancing flexibility, communication, and safety features—emerged stronger in the recovery phase.

Looking forward, the future of tourism distribution will hinge not on replacing OTAs but on balancing their strengths with supplier-driven strategies. The most sustainable path is **hybrid distribution**, where suppliers embrace OTA visibility while simultaneously developing strong

direct channels. This includes investing in user-friendly websites, offering exclusive direct-booking perks, building loyalty programs, and creating meaningful digital engagement with guests.

In conclusion, OTAs are here to stay, and their influence will only grow as technology advances. Their role in shaping traveler expectations, regulating digital visibility, and transforming the competitive landscape is undeniable. However, suppliers who understand the dynamics of OTA power—and who proactively build strategies that balance reliance with independence—will be better positioned to navigate the complexities of modern tourism distribution. The future belongs to those who can leverage the benefits of OTAs without surrendering full control to them.

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