



European Institute of Innovation,
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**Title: Online Travel Agencies as Transformative
Intermediaries in Global Tourism Distribution:
A Critical Assessment**

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ABSTRACT

The rapid rise of Online Travel Agencies (OTAs) has dramatically restructured global tourism distribution channels, shifting power away from traditional intermediaries and toward digital platforms that mediate visibility, trust, and competitiveness. This assignment critically evaluates the strategic role of OTAs within contemporary tourism distribution systems by examining their growing influence over consumer behavior, supplier relationships, and market dynamics. Drawing on recent academic research and industry insights, the abstract highlights how OTAs leverage algorithmic ranking, user-generated content, and mobile booking technologies to redefine how travelers search, compare, and purchase tourism products. At the same time, it identifies challenges faced by suppliers, including reduced autonomy, increased dependency, and rising commission pressures. Additionally, this assignment explores major disruptions—particularly the digital acceleration triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic—and how OTAs have responded to evolving traveler expectations around flexibility, safety, and seamless digital experiences. The abstract concludes by proposing that hybrid distribution models, supported by direct booking strategies and enhanced digital capabilities, represent the most sustainable approach for tourism suppliers navigating an increasingly platform-dominated environment.

INTRODUCTION

Tourism distribution channels represent the mechanisms through which travel products reach consumers, forming an essential link between tourism suppliers and global demand. In traditional tourism systems, these channels were dominated by travel agents, tour operators, wholesalers, and global distribution systems (GDS). These intermediaries managed access to inventory, packaged products, and provided consultation to travelers. However, over the past two decades, tourism distribution has undergone a profound digital transformation, greatly influenced by technological advancement, increased internet penetration, and the changing preferences of digitally empowered travelers.

At the center of this transformation are **Online Travel Agencies (OTAs)**—digital platforms that aggregate travel services and allow consumers to search, compare, and book accommodations, flights, tours, and other experiences. Platforms such as Booking.com, Expedia, Agoda, Airbnb, and Trip.com have become integral to how travelers engage with the tourism marketplace. Unlike traditional intermediaries, OTAs operate using vast databases, algorithmic sorting mechanisms, review systems, and mobile-first interfaces, creating dynamic digital marketplaces where suppliers compete for visibility and consumer attention.

OTAs have influenced not only *how* consumers book travel, but also *how* tourism suppliers manage their distribution strategies. While OTAs offer access to global audiences and help suppliers reduce marketing burdens, participation comes at a cost. Commission fees, content requirements, rate parity expectations, and dependence on platform algorithms create complex

challenges for tourism businesses. Additionally, OTAs' dominance raises questions about long-term competitiveness, supplier autonomy, and the sustainability of distribution practices.

From the consumer perspective, OTAs have become deeply embedded in the travel planning journey. Travelers increasingly rely on digital reviews, transparent pricing, and seamless booking experiences. Research suggests that decision-making is shaped by perceived trust, convenience, and the ability to compare multiple options easily—all key strengths of OTA platforms. Mobile booking, in particular, has exploded in popularity and has contributed to OTAs strengthening their market positions through feature-rich mobile applications.

The COVID-19 pandemic further accelerated reliance on digital channels. Travel uncertainty, frequent policy changes, and rapidly shifting border restrictions made flexibility and updated information crucial. OTAs, able to communicate large-scale changes quickly, emerged as essential tools for travelers navigating the complex post-pandemic travel environment. Many platforms responded by revising cancellation policies, enhancing search filters, and integrating clearer safety indicators, reinforcing their role as central travel decision-makers.

Given this context, Assignment 11 seeks to address several key questions:

1. How have OTAs reshaped traditional tourism distribution models?
2. What factors drive consumer dependence on OTAs in contemporary tourism markets?
3. How do OTAs impact supplier competitiveness, autonomy, and profitability?
4. In what ways do algorithms, digital reviews, and mobile technologies influence OTA dominance?
5. What strategies can tourism suppliers adopt to reduce excessive OTA dependency?

By exploring these questions through an integrated review of contemporary literature, industry analysis, and conceptual frameworks, this assignment provides a fresh, critical examination of the evolving role of OTAs in global tourism distribution. It also highlights the need for adaptive strategies that balance the opportunities OTAs provide with the long-term need for supplier-controlled distribution pathways.

LITERATURE REVIEW

1. The Evolution of Tourism Distribution Channels

Tourism distribution channels have undergone significant shifts over the last several decades, moving from linear, agent-based pathways toward interconnected, digital ecosystems. Before the rise of online technologies, distribution operated through physical intermediaries such as retail travel agencies, wholesalers, and tour operators (Bastakis et al., 2004). These intermediaries managed inventory, packaged products, and reduced search costs for consumers, who lacked direct access to supplier information.

The emergence of the internet disrupted this traditional model. As highlighted by Buhalis and Jun (2011), digitalization allowed suppliers to present their products directly online, reducing dependence on retail travel agents. However, this direct shift was soon complemented by the rise of Online Travel Agencies (OTAs), which capitalized on the need for aggregated, user-friendly search and booking systems. OTAs quickly became dominant players, offering technological capabilities and convenience far beyond what individual suppliers could provide.

Today, tourism distribution channels operate as complex networks combining direct bookings, OTA platforms, meta-search engines, and social media referrals. As distribution becomes increasingly data-driven, the power dynamics between suppliers, intermediaries, and consumers continue to evolve.

2. Online Travel Agencies as Platform-Based Intermediaries

OTAs belong to a broader category of **multi-sided digital platforms** that facilitate interactions between two or more user groups—travel suppliers and travelers. According to Rochet and Tirole's (2006) platform theory, OTAs create value by reducing transaction costs, improving information flow, and coordinating exchanges efficiently.

What differentiates OTAs from traditional intermediaries is their ability to:

- consolidate vast tourism inventories,
- use algorithms to match users with products,
- gather extensive customer data,
- foster user-generated review ecosystems,
- operate on global scales through localized interfaces.

Studies by Zeng and Gerritsen (2014) show that the platform nature of OTAs allows them to benefit exponentially from network effects, as each new user or property listing enhances the overall value for others. This networked growth explains the rapid dominance of brands like Booking.com, Airbnb, and Expedia Group.

3. Consumer Behavior in OTA Environments

3.1 Information Search and Evaluation

Consumers turn to OTAs primarily because they simplify decision-making in an information-rich environment. According to Xiang et al. (2017), travelers perceive OTAs as efficient tools for gathering and comparing information from multiple suppliers. Sophisticated filtering tools, map-based navigation, and structured accommodation details make OTAs highly appealing for both novice and experienced travelers.

3.2 Trust, Transparency, and Risk Reduction

Travel involves uncertainty, and OTAs have built digital systems that increase trust. Peer-generated reviews, verified ratings, and transparent pricing all serve as reassurance mechanisms

(Sparks & Browning, 2011). This form of **digital trust-building** is one of the key competitive advantages OTAs possess over supplier websites, which may be perceived as biased or incomplete.

3.3 Influence of Electronic Word-of-Mouth (eWOM)

Research shows that eWOM significantly shapes traveler decisions, with user reviews being considered more reliable than expert opinions or marketing messages (Munar & Jacobsen, 2014). OTAs leverage this by integrating mass review systems that organize ratings by traveler type, date, and context. This structure not only legitimizes the platform but also influences search rankings and conversion rates.

3.4 Mobile-First Travel Behavior

The widespread adoption of smartphones has shifted the travel planning process from desktop to mobile. Wang et al. (2021) note that travelers increasingly conduct last-minute bookings through mobile apps due to their speed, convenience, and integrated payment options. OTAs have invested heavily in mobile interfaces, allowing them to capture the growing segment of mobile-dependent travelers and outperform many suppliers' direct apps.

4. Benefits OTAs Provide to Tourism Suppliers

4.1 Global Reach and Market Access

A consistent theme in the literature is that OTAs dramatically improve visibility for suppliers (especially small hotels). Inversini and Masiero (2014) emphasize that OTAs function as global windows, allowing properties to reach international audiences that they could not access independently.

4.2 Demand Generation and Occupancy Stability

OTAs drive significant booking volumes, often serving as essential revenue sources during low-demand periods. According to Lee and Jang (2018), many small and independent hotels depend on OTAs to stabilize occupancy, compete with chain properties, and fill last-minute inventory.

4.3 Reduction of Marketing Costs

Instead of investing heavily in digital advertising, suppliers rely on OTA marketing strategies, which include large-scale search engine marketing (SEM), reward systems, and retargeting campaigns. These marketing services—bundled within OTA partnerships—lower the financial burden on suppliers.

4.4 Enhanced Booking Efficiency

Real-time availability, automated confirmations, and instant booking functionalities reduce operational workload and improve accuracy. This efficiency benefits both travelers and suppliers, particularly in regions where manual booking procedures previously dominated.

5. Challenges and Concerns for Suppliers

5.1 High Commission Rates

Commission fees, which can exceed 15–25%, remain a major concern for hotels. Research by Melián-González and Bulchand-Gidumal (2016) shows that these costs significantly impact profitability, especially for smaller properties that lack negotiating power.

5.2 Loss of Autonomy and Increased Dependence

Suppliers often become reliant on OTAs for a substantial share of their bookings. As Oskam and Boswijk (2016) observe, this reliance shifts bargaining power toward OTAs, limiting suppliers' control over pricing, cancellation terms, and promotional strategies.

5.3 Limited Access to Customer Data

Customer relationship management (CRM) is crucial for repeat business, yet OTAs frequently restrict access to customer information. This limits suppliers' ability to build loyalty programs, personalize services, or maintain direct communication channels.

5.4 Algorithmic Visibility and Competition

OTA algorithms determine rankings based on factors such as conversion rates, review scores, pricing competitiveness, and participation in paid visibility programs (Li et al., 2020). These ranking systems often favor well-performing or well-funded properties, making it difficult for smaller hotels to compete.

6. Airbnb and the Expansion of Tourism Supply

Airbnb's role within the OTA ecosystem represents a significant departure from traditional accommodation distribution. Guttentag (2019) argues that Airbnb expanded the tourism supply by enabling peer-to-peer lodging, adding millions of listings worldwide and reshaping traveler expectations. Airbnb has also contributed to a rise in:

- long-stay bookings,
- lifestyle-based travel,
- authentic local experiences,
- digital nomad preferences.

This has pressured traditional OTAs and hotels to innovate and diversify their offerings.

7. Impact of COVID-19 on OTA Dynamics

The pandemic intensified the role of OTAs. As travel restrictions changed rapidly, travelers turned to OTAs for:

- flexible booking options,
- real-time updates,
- clear cancellation policies,
- safety information.

According to Sigala (2020), COVID-19 accelerated digital adoption and accelerated the shift toward online intermediaries. OTAs that adapted quickly—particularly Airbnb—became indispensable tools for navigating uncertainty.

8. Ongoing Technological Innovations in OTA Systems

Technological advancements remain central to OTA competitiveness. Key innovations include:

- **AI-driven personalisation**, recommending ideal properties based on user behavior (Huang & Rust, 2021).
- **Predictive analytics**, enabling demand forecasting and dynamic pricing.
- **Chatbots and automated messaging**, providing 24/7 customer assistance.
- **AR/VR content**, offering immersive previews of rooms or attractions.
- **Super-app ecosystems**, integrating multiple lifestyle services within a single interface.

These technologies create a user experience that individual hotels rarely match.

9. Hybrid Distribution as the Future Outlook

Recent literature consistently emphasizes the importance of **hybrid distribution strategies**, where suppliers balance OTA exposure with direct booking development. O'Connor and Assaf (2021) argue that combining OTA visibility with:

- loyalty programs,
- targeted email marketing,
- website optimization,
- exclusive direct-booking benefits,

is the most sustainable approach for maintaining competitiveness while reducing over-reliance on OTAs.

METHODOLOGY

1. Research Approach

This assignment adopts a **qualitative, exploratory research methodology** to examine the complex and constantly evolving role of Online Travel Agencies (OTAs) within global tourism distribution channels. A qualitative approach is most appropriate because the subject matter involves digital consumer behavior, platform economics, algorithmic influence, and supplier–platform relationships—areas that are deeply contextual and not easily measured through numerical methods.

As Jennings (2010) suggests, qualitative approaches allow researchers to uncover underlying patterns, meanings, and motivations within tourism systems. In the case of OTAs, understanding social trust, perceived convenience, and supplier dependency requires interpretative analysis rather than statistical modeling.

This approach enables a holistic examination of how OTAs function, how travelers psychologically engage with them, and how suppliers negotiate their place in a platform-dominated marketplace.

2. Data Sources

This study relies exclusively on **secondary data**, gathered from various academically reliable and industry-recognized sources, including:

- peer-reviewed journals in tourism, hospitality, digital marketing, and information systems;
- academic books on distribution channels, platform ecosystems, and online consumer behavior;
- industry reports from Booking Holdings, Airbnb, Expedia Group, Agoda, and Trip.com;
- tourism insights from UNWTO, WTTC, Phocuswright, and Skift Research;
- market analyses and case studies featuring hotels, peer-to-peer hosts, and OTA strategies;
- credible online publications and industry-focused news outlets.

Collecting data from a wide range of sources ensures a robust and triangulated understanding of OTA impacts.

3. Selection Criteria

Sources were selected using the following criteria:

- relevance to OTAs, online consumer trends, or digital tourism distribution;
- recency (mostly 2019–2024) to capture ongoing technological and behavioral changes;
- academic or professional credibility;
- depth of insight into theoretical concepts or industry practices;
- alignment with the assignment’s research questions.

Older foundational works were only included when necessary to explain theoretical frameworks.

4. Analytical Approach

A **thematic analysis** was applied to synthesize the data. Following Braun & Clarke (2006), the procedure involved:

1. reading and re-reading all selected literature;
2. open-coding key concepts related to OTA operations, consumer decision-making, and supplier experiences;
3. grouping concepts into overarching themes such as:
 - trust-building systems,
 - platform power and dependency,
 - algorithmic visibility,
 - mobile-first consumption,
 - post-pandemic digital acceleration;
4. synthesizing these themes into coherent findings and critical discussions.

This analytical structure supports a deeper, multi-layered interpretation of OTA influence.

5. Limitations

The methodology has several limitations:

- lack of primary data such as interviews with hotel managers or OTA executives;
- proprietary nature of OTA algorithms limits transparency;
- commercial bias may exist in industry-produced reports;
- rapid technological evolution may render some findings outdated quickly.

Despite these limitations, the combination of academic and industry sources provides a sufficiently comprehensive base for analysis.

FINDINGS

1. OTAs Have Become Core Digital Gatekeepers of Tourism Distribution

The findings clearly indicate that OTAs occupy a **central and influential position** within the tourism distribution ecosystem. They control critical functions such as:

- visibility of suppliers,
- search processes,
- review systems,
- pricing comparisons,
- booking pathways.

Their digital presence has become so dominant that they effectively act as gatekeepers that manage how travelers first encounter and evaluate tourism products.

2. Travelers Prefer OTAs for Convenience, Trust, and Reduced Risk

OTAs have grown because they fulfill essential traveler needs. The findings revealed that travelers gravitate toward OTAs due to:

- **structured information** that simplifies comparison,
- **transparent pricing** that minimizes hidden costs,
- **verified reviews** that reduce anxiety,
- **flexible booking policies** that support uncertain travel planning,
- **ease of navigation** on both websites and mobile apps.

As a result, OTAs embed themselves deeply into the consumer decision-making journey.

3. Suppliers Benefit From OTA Visibility but Experience Significant Dependency

Suppliers—especially smaller hotels and independent establishments—gain substantial advantages from OTA participation, such as:

- access to global markets,
- higher occupancy rates,
- improved exposure to new segments,
- reduced marketing effort,
- reliable reservation systems.

However, these advantages come with consequences:

- **high commission fees**, sometimes cutting deeply into profit margins;
- **loss of control** over pricing, customer policies, and branding;
- **limited access to guest data**, reducing marketing potential;
- **algorithm-based visibility**, which suppliers cannot influence independently;
- **long-term dependency**, especially for accommodation businesses in competitive destinations.

This duality is central to understanding OTA–supplier relationships.

4. Algorithmic Ranking Heavily Influences Supplier Competitiveness

One of the most significant findings is that OTA platforms use **algorithmic ranking systems** that act as invisible regulators of competition. Ranking determines:

- which properties appear on the first page,
- which receive more clicks,
- which achieve higher conversion rates.

Algorithms consider factors such as:

- review quality and volume,
- competitive pricing,
- responsiveness to inquiries,
- full and accurate property content,
- participation in OTA promotional programs.

These ranking mechanisms tend to favor well-performing suppliers, making it difficult for smaller or newer properties to gain traction.

5. Airbnb Has Expanded the Accommodation Landscape

Airbnb stands out because it reshaped supply by introducing peer-to-peer lodging, which has:

- diversified tourism products,
- increased rural and urban inventory availability,
- encouraged lifestyle-based and experiential travel,
- expanded markets for long-term stays and remote workers.

This diversification challenges traditional OTAs and hotels, forcing them to adapt.

6. COVID-19 Accelerated OTA Relevance

The pandemic shifted travel patterns and made digital channels indispensable. Travelers used OTAs to check:

- border regulations,
- cancellation policies,
- safety updates,
- destination guidelines.

OTAs that offered clearer policies and more flexible options gained stronger loyalty.

7. Mobile Apps Now Dominate Booking Behavior

Findings emphasize that mobile apps are now the preferred booking tool for many travelers, especially younger demographics. OTA apps outperform supplier apps due to:

- seamless interfaces,
- saved preferences and payment methods,
- instant booking flows,
- mobile-exclusive deals.

This reinforces OTAs' technological advantages.

8. Technological Innovation Continues to Strengthen OTA Dominance

OTAs invest heavily in digital innovation, including:

- personalized AI-driven recommendations,
- dynamic pricing engines,
- chatbot-based customer service,
- immersive AR/VR previews,
- integrated travel “super-apps” in Asia,
- loyalty ecosystems spanning multiple services.

These tools create user experiences suppliers cannot easily replicate.

DISCUSSION

1. OTAs Function as Digital Ecosystems With Systemic Influence

The findings confirm that OTAs act not merely as intermediaries but as **digital ecosystems** that set rules, shape visibility, and influence market outcomes. Their control over search results effectively grants them regulatory power within the digital tourism landscape.

2. Consumer Behavior Continues to Strengthen OTA Dominance

Travelers prefer platforms that reduce uncertainty and streamline decision-making. Since OTAs excel in these areas, their relevance becomes self-reinforcing. The more travelers rely on OTAs, the more powerful these platforms become.

3. Supplier Dependency Represents a Major Structural Concern

While OTAs provide valuable benefits, heavy reliance creates vulnerabilities such as:

- loss of autonomy,
- weakened customer relationships,
- reduced profit margins,
- limited control over brand identity.

Suppliers must therefore adopt strategies that balance reliance and independence.

4. Algorithmic Visibility Creates Unequal Competition

OTA algorithms amplify inequalities by rewarding high-performing and revenue-producing suppliers. Small hotels lacking resources to optimize listings or join promotional programs often struggle to compete.

5. Technological Gaps Between OTAs and Suppliers Are Widening

The pace of OTA technological innovation—compared to the limited budgets of small suppliers—creates a widening competitive gap. OTAs’ ability to harness AI, automation, and big data gives them long-term strategic advantages.

6. Hybrid Distribution Is the Most Sustainable Path Forward

A balanced strategy is essential. Suppliers should:

- use OTAs for visibility and reach,
- strengthen direct booking channels,
- develop loyalty programs,
- invest in website quality and mobile optimization,
- cultivate brand identity through social media.

Hybrid distribution allows suppliers to remain competitive while reducing dependency risk.

CONCLUSION

The rise of Online Travel Agencies (OTAs) has dramatically reshaped the architecture of global tourism distribution. What once functioned as a fairly linear system—dominated by travel agents, wholesalers, and tour operators—has evolved into a complex, platform-driven ecosystem where algorithmic visibility, real-time information, and mobile-first consumption determine which tourism products succeed.

Across all findings, a central theme emerges: OTAs have become **structural power brokers** in contemporary tourism distribution. Their influence extends well beyond connecting travelers and suppliers. They shape search pathways, filter information, regulate visibility through algorithmic ranking, and mediate trust through vast review systems. As a result, OTAs play an active role in redefining how both travelers and suppliers navigate the tourism marketplace.

From the traveler perspective, OTAs meet deep psychological and functional needs. They simplify information search, minimize uncertainty, provide transparent comparisons, and offer flexible booking conditions—features that traditional intermediaries rarely matched. The dominance of mobile apps reinforces OTA importance, as travelers increasingly expect fast, seamless, and personalized digital interactions. This alignment between consumer expectations and OTA capabilities explains the platforms’ enduring popularity.

For suppliers, OTAs present a dual narrative. On one hand, hotels, guesthouses, apartment hosts, and tour providers benefit enormously from increased visibility and international reach. OTAs serve as indispensable distribution channels, especially for small and independent businesses

with limited marketing budgets. They drive occupancy, expand exposure, and reduce manual administrative burdens.

On the other hand, dependence on OTAs introduces substantial challenges. High commission fees reduce profit margins, algorithmic systems dictate competitiveness, and limited access to guest data hampers efforts to build loyalty. OTA dominance also undermines supplier autonomy, as platforms establish the rules, policies, and ranking criteria that suppliers must follow in order to remain competitive. This power imbalance is a defining characteristic of the digital tourism economy.

Technological innovation amplifies OTA leadership. Their continuous investment in artificial intelligence, dynamic pricing tools, chatbots, AR/VR content, and integrated super-app ecosystems positions them far ahead of average suppliers. As technology becomes increasingly central to traveler decision-making, OTAs' competitive advantage grows stronger.

The COVID-19 pandemic intensified reliance on OTAs, reinforcing their role as essential information intermediaries during times of uncertainty. Those platforms that adapted quickly—offering flexible options, clear policies, and updated safety information—solidified their place in the post-pandemic travel recovery.

Looking ahead, the future of tourism distribution will likely remain hybrid, with suppliers pairing OTA participation with strong direct-booking strategies. To reduce vulnerability, suppliers must focus on:

- strengthening brand identity,
- improving website and mobile usability,
- developing loyalty programs,
- creating value-added direct offers,
- leveraging social media and content marketing,
- nurturing personalized guest communication.

OTAs will continue to be central actors in tourism distribution, but suppliers who strategically manage their presence across multiple channels will be better positioned for long-term resilience and profitability.

In conclusion, OTAs have transformed tourism distribution in ways that are enduring and far-reaching. Their impact spans consumer psychology, supplier strategy, technological standards, and market competition. While dependence on platforms carries risks, the opportunities they offer—especially in visibility, market access, and consumer trust—make them indispensable components of the tourism ecosystem. The challenge for the future is not eliminating OTA reliance, but balancing it with sustainable, supplier-driven strategies that preserve autonomy, enhance profitability, and build long-term relationships with travelers.

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