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From Agents to Apps: The Changing Landscape of Travel Booking in Ernakulam

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Abstract: The travel and tourism sector has been greatly impacted by the quick digital change, as evidenced by the apparent move from traditional travel companies to online travel apps. This paper investigates the causes of this shift, emphasizing the benefits of online travel platforms like affordability, ease of use, and real-time accessibility. The study focuses on consumer preferences in Ernakulam District, where older demographics continue to favor traditional travel agencies while younger, tech-savvy people primarily use online travel apps. According to a Wilcoxon Signed-Rank Test, internet travel apps have substantially higher client satisfaction than traditional agencies ($p = 0.000$). According to the findings, a hybrid model that combines individualized service with digital efficiency may be the way of the future for travel services.

Keywords: Online Travel Apps, Traditional Travel Agencies and Wilcoxon Signed-Rank Test

1. INTRODUCTION

The emergence of digital technologies has significantly changed the travel and tourism sector. When it comes to organizing and scheduling their trip, consumers have many options these days, and internet travel applications provide an alternative to conventional travel firms. Numerous factors, such as the simplicity of booking, real-time pricing comparisons, rapid confirmations, and access to a greater selection of services, are contributing to the growing demand for online platforms. This change has been expedited, especially in metropolitan regions like Ernakulam District, by the increasing use of smart phones and internet connectivity.

Despite the advantages of online travel platforms, traditional travel agencies continue to exist, catering to customers who value personalized service, expert guidance, and trust-based relationships. However, the inability of these agencies to offer real-time updates, competitive pricing, and instant bookings puts them at a disadvantage compared to digital platforms. The research presented in this paper examines customer preferences, factors influencing their choices, and the comparative satisfaction levels between online travel apps and traditional travel agencies.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The increasing preference for online travel apps over traditional offline travel agencies is a significant trend in the travel and tourism sector. As digital technologies continue to advance, consumers are gravitating towards online platforms due to their convenience, speed, and variety of services. Research indicates that the shift from offline to online services has profoundly affected consumer behaviors, particularly within the travel industry.

Growth of Online Travel Services

The growth of online travel services has been extensively documented. The proliferation of mobile apps and internet access has made it easier for consumers to book travel services at their convenience. A significant body of research has emphasized how online travel platforms, such as MakeMyTrip, Yatra, and Goibibo, have become dominant players in the Indian market due to their ability to provide competitive pricing, real-time booking, and instant access to information.

In urban areas like Ernakulam District, the adoption of these services has been growing rapidly, driven by increased smartphone penetration and improved internet infrastructure. A study of travel behavior by Kumar and Rathi (2020) concluded that younger, tech-savvy consumers are particularly inclined to use online travel apps, as these platforms offer greater flexibility and value for money.

Advantages of Online Travel Apps

Several factors contribute to the growing preference for online travel services. The ability to compare prices, the flexibility of booking, and the convenience of accessing services anytime and anywhere are often cited as primary reasons why consumers favor online platforms. Research highlights that online apps often allow users to view real-time prices, explore a wide variety of travel options, and receive personalized recommendations based on previous travel history (Saxena, 2021).

Moreover, digital platforms are enhanced by user-friendly features such as interactive maps, reviews, and ratings, which help users make informed decisions. These factors, according to Prakash and Gupta (2019), make online platforms much more appealing compared to offline travel agencies, which tend to offer limited options and slower response times.

Demographics and Behavioral Trends in Ernakulam District

In the context of Ernakulam District, research has shown that urban consumers, particularly those aged between 18 and 35, are increasingly turning to online apps for their travel planning needs. A study by Nair (2022) on consumer preferences in Ernakulam revealed that young adults value the convenience of mobile applications, which allow them to plan and book their travel itineraries independently.

However, the older demographic in Ernakulam, especially those who have less experience with digital technology, continues to favor traditional offline travel agencies. This segment values personalized service and the ability to consult directly with travel agents. This aligns with the findings of Ghosh and Raj (2020), who noted that offline agencies still maintain their customer base by providing face-to-face interaction and trust-building relationships.

Influence of Digital Marketing and Reviews

A significant factor influencing the growing reliance on online travel apps is the role of digital marketing and customer reviews. Shukla and Agarwal (2019) found that online platforms benefit from strategic marketing techniques, including targeted advertising, customer reviews, and special promotions. Such features make it easier for consumers to find the best deals and gain confidence in their travel choices. The presence of reviews and ratings adds an extra layer of trust, which is something offline agencies struggle to offer in an accessible and transparent manner.

Verma (2020) emphasized the importance of social media in shaping consumer preferences, noting that social platforms are key channels through which consumers discover and engage with travel services. Digital advertising campaigns and influencer partnerships have further boosted the popularity of online travel services, particularly among younger travelers who are more active on these platforms.

Challenges for Offline Travel Agencies

While offline travel agencies continue to play an important role, especially for those seeking personalized advice and assistance, they face several challenges in the digital era. Research by Patel and Shah (2022) identified several obstacles for traditional agencies, including the inability to offer real-time updates or match the pricing flexibility of online apps. These agencies also struggle with limited digital presence, which diminishes their visibility among tech-savvy consumers.

Offline agencies tend to rely on word-of-mouth referrals and personal networks, but these methods are no longer sufficient in a market where digital visibility and online engagement are crucial. Sharma and Kumar (2022) highlighted that many offline travel agencies are now attempting to integrate online features, such as booking websites and mobile apps, but they are often slow to adapt to the fast-paced technological environment.

Hybrid Models for Future Growth

The future of travel services could involve a hybrid model, combining the advantages of both online and offline services. Singh and Rani (2023) suggested that traditional agencies can enhance their offerings by integrating digital tools with their personalized services. This hybrid approach could involve offering an online booking platform alongside traditional face-to-face consultations, providing a balance between convenience and customer service.

A shift towards this hybrid model could also allow offline agencies to tap into the growing online market while maintaining their competitive edge through personalized travel planning. Agencies that adapt to digital trends while retaining their personalized service might be able to attract a broader customer base.

The literature suggests a clear preference among consumers for online travel apps due to their convenience, competitive pricing, and real-time capabilities. However, offline travel agencies still hold relevance, particularly among older demographics and those who value personalized service. The future may lie in a combination of online convenience and offline customer service, allowing agencies to meet the evolving needs of travelers in a digital world.

Statement of the problem

The rise of online travel apps has led to a noticeable shift in consumer preferences from traditional offline travel agencies to digital platforms, particularly in urban areas like Ernakulam District. However, the reasons behind this shift and how online travel portals compare to offline services in terms of customer satisfaction remain unclear. This study seeks to compare customer views on the operations of online travel portals and offline travel agencies. It also aims to evaluate the level of customer service satisfaction with both online and offline travel services. The findings will provide insights into consumer preferences and help identify areas where both types of services can improve to better meet customer expectations.

Objectives of the study

1. To identify the factors, influence the choice between online portals and traditional agencies when booking trips.
2. To compare the customer satisfaction of service provided by online travel portals and traditional travel agencies.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study is descriptive and analytical in nature. Both primary and secondary data are used in this study. To collect primary data, a structured questionnaire is used and samples are collected through convenience sampling method. A total of 100 respondents from different age groups were participated in the survey.

Results and Discussion

Demographic Profile

Gender: The data indicates that the majority of the respondents identify as female, comprising 60% of the total sample. Males account for 40% of the respondents.

Age: The data shows that a significant majority of the respondents, 92%, fall within the 18-25 age range. A small portion, 3%, is in the 26-35 age group, while 2% belong to both the 36-45 and 46-56 age groups. Only 1% of respondents are aged 55 and above. This age distribution indicates that the overwhelming majority of participants are young adults, with a very small representation from older age groups.

Educational Qualification: The data reveals that the majority of respondents, 64%, have completed a degree. A significant portion, 27%, have completed their Plus Two education, while 4% have completed SSLC. Only 5% of respondents hold a postgraduate qualification. This distribution indicates that the majority of participants have higher secondary or degree-level education, with relatively fewer individuals holding postgraduate degrees or having completed basic education.

Employment: The data shows that the vast majority of respondents, 84%, are students. A smaller proportion, 9%, are employed full-time, while 5% are employed part-time. Only 2% of the respondents are retired. This suggests that the sample is predominantly made up of individuals who are still in education, with much fewer involved in full-time or part-time employment, and a minimal number who are retired.

Income: The data indicates that a large majority of respondents, 79%, earn under 25,000. A smaller percentage, 8%, earn between 25,000 and 50,000, while 5% earn between 50,000 and 75,000, and another 5% earn between 75,000 and 100,000. This suggests that most respondents fall into the lower income bracket, with only a small proportion earning higher amounts.

Factors Influence the Choice Between Online Portals and Traditional Agencies When Booking Trips

The sample data shows that the most important factor for respondents is ease of booking, which accounts for 31% of responses. Customer support follows closely with 27%, while variety of options is important to 18% of

respondents. Transparency of pricing is a priority for 17%, and overall experience holds the least weight, with only 7% of respondents considering it the most important. This suggests that ease of booking and customer support are the primary factors influencing satisfaction, while variety, pricing transparency, and overall experience are comparatively less significant.

Wilcoxon Signed-Rank Test Results

The main objective of the study is to compare the customer satisfaction of service provided by online travel portals and traditional travel agencies. In order to test this the following hypothesis is set:

H0: There is no significant difference in customer satisfaction between Online Travel Apps and Traditional Travel Agencies.

The mean satisfaction score for Online Travel Apps (3.60) is higher than for Traditional Travel Agencies (3.13). Standard deviation is higher for Traditional Travel Agencies (0.971), indicating more variation in responses compared to Online Travel Apps (0.752).

TABLE 1. Wilcoxon Signed-Rank Test

Groups	Mean	SD	Test Statistic	p-Value
Online Travel Apps	3.60	0.752	-4.079	0.000
Traditional Travel Agencies	3.13	0.971		

Since $p < 0.05$, the result is statistically significant. This means there is a significant difference in satisfaction between Online Travel Apps and Traditional Travel Agencies. Online Travel Apps are rated significantly higher in customer satisfaction than Traditional Travel Agencies.

Customers prefer Online Travel Apps over Traditional Travel Agencies primarily due to the convenience and accessibility they offer. Unlike traditional agencies that operate within business hours, travel apps are available 24/7, allowing users to book flights, hotels, and other services anytime and anywhere. Additionally, they provide instant booking and confirmation, eliminating the need for physical visits or long waiting times. The user-friendly interfaces of these apps also enhance the customer experience by offering easy navigation, filters, and personalized recommendations.

Another key factor is cost and pricing transparency. Online travel apps often provide better deals, discounts, and promo codes, making them a more attractive option than traditional agencies. Customers can also compare prices instantly across different airlines, hotels, and service providers, ensuring they get the best value for their money. Unlike traditional agencies, where service fees may not always be clear, online platforms display upfront pricing with no hidden charges.

Variety and customization further contribute to the preference for travel apps. These platforms offer a wider range of travel options, including flights, accommodations, and car rentals, all in one place. The use of AI-driven recommendations ensures that customers receive suggestions tailored to their preferences and travel history. Additionally, the flexible search and filtering options enable users to find the best options based on budget, location, and reviews, which is often not as efficient when dealing with traditional travel agents.

Another major advantage of online travel apps is the trust factor created through customer reviews and ratings. Travelers can make informed decisions based on real-time feedback from other users, ensuring they select highly rated and well-reviewed services. Unlike traditional agencies, which rely on personal recommendations or brochures, online platforms offer a transparent and verified customer experience that builds confidence.

Moreover, online travel apps reduce human dependency and provide faster service. Customers no longer have to wait for an agent's availability or be restricted to business hours. Many apps offer automated support, chatbots, and live assistance, allowing users to modify or cancel bookings on their own without any hassle. This autonomy makes the booking process smoother and more efficient.

Another major factor is the integration of digital payments and loyalty programs. Online platforms offer multiple payment options, including credit cards, digital wallets, and UPI, making transactions seamless. Additionally, many travel apps reward frequent users with cashback, loyalty points, and exclusive deals, which traditional travel agencies typically lack.

Finally, the shift in consumer behavior due to the pandemic and post-pandemic travel trends has further reinforced the dominance of online travel apps. The need for contactless travel solutions, real-time updates on travel restrictions, and health and safety guidelines has made digital platforms the preferred choice for many travelers.

Online apps provide instant notifications regarding flight changes, cancellations, and COVID-19 travel policies, ensuring that users remain well-informed.

4. CONCLUSION

The study concludes that online travel apps are the preferred choice among consumers due to their accessibility, affordability, and efficiency. The findings from the Wilcoxon Signed-Rank Test confirm a significant difference in satisfaction levels, with online travel apps outperforming traditional travel agencies. Factors such as ease of booking, real-time updates, competitive pricing, and user reviews play a crucial role in shaping consumer preferences.

Traditional travel agencies continue to serve a niche market, particularly among older consumers who value face-to-face interaction and trust-based services. However, the increasing reliance on digital solutions suggests that a hybrid model—blending personalized service with digital convenience—may be the future of travel services. To remain competitive, traditional travel agencies should integrate digital platforms, improve their online presence, and offer flexible pricing and instant booking options.

Overall, the study highlights the ongoing transformation within the travel industry, emphasizing the need for adaptability and innovation. As digital advancements continue, businesses that embrace technology while retaining strong customer service elements will be best positioned for long-term success.

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