



Use of Digital and Smart Tools in the Operation of Travel Agencies

Kristína Šambronská*, Daniela Matušíková**

Abstract *The development and application of digital technologies is fundamentally changing the way people live, work, travel and do their business. In this process, tourism industry is also being transformed and changing. Current tourists are used to work and travel with digital tools. The goal of travel agencies is to provide them with comfortable digital experiences to attract them to buy their products. Digitization helps them in this operation. While in recent times the website and e-mail were the basic tools of digital marketing of travel agencies, actually the social media are enormously popular tools. The originality of the study is based on the up-to-date finding out the current view of employees on using the digital tools in the operation of travel agencies. The research was based on finding out, how the employees of travel agencies evaluate the tools of digital communication (standard and the smart ones) used in practice when addressing the clients. The main research method was a questionnaire. 117 out of 250 travel companies registered under the association and doing business in the territory of the Slovak Republic participated in the research. The answers of the respondents were evaluated by regression analysis. The results showed that from the smart tools, the chatbots are used the most. Use of chatbots in travel agencies increases the communication level with the client and social networks help in promoting the products of travel agencies.*

Keywords: *Smart Tourism, Tour Operator, Communication, Product Promotion, Social Networks, Chatbots, E-Mail*

INTRODUCTION

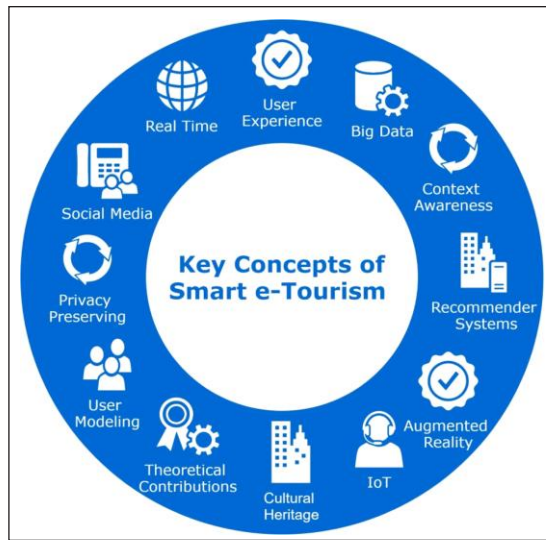
One of the characteristics of tourism today identifies it as one of the dominant sectors that has developed rapidly together with e-tourism and provides “smart tourism” as part of their new technology (Hamid et al., 2021). Gretzel et al. (2015) distinguished e-tourism and smart tourism when they provided a description of smart tourism. They concluded that e-tourism refers to providing a digital connection between a business and clients, and smart tourism involves connecting the digital and physical worlds through available technologies such as the Internet of Things, chatbots, social media, etc. Hamid et al. (2021) identified the key concepts of the smart tourism sector (see Fig. 1) based on researching studies in the IEEE databases, 160 studies were studied, Web of Science (WoS) 302 studies and ScienceDirect (SD) in the

number of 778 studies (after removing duplicate studies in the databases) in the range 2013 to 2020. Key concepts are recommender systems, social media, Internet of Things (IoT), big data, augmented reality, real time, user experience, user modelling, theoretical benefits, cultural heritage and privacy.

It follows from the mentioned key concepts that the development of contemporary tourism is related to huge technological development. The competition between regions in attracting tourists depends mainly on the technologies that are applied and chewed in individual sectors of tourism, such as current situations, booking flights, accommodation and facilitating communication with visitors and others (Habeeb, Weli, 2020), which are used by tourism companies (Florido-Benítez, 2024) i.e. also travel agencies.

* Associate Professor, University of Prešov, Faculty of Management and Business, Department of Tourism and Hotel Management, Konštantínova 16, 080 01 Prešov, Slovakia. Email: kristina.sambronska@unipo.sk
ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7327-9431> (Corresponding Author)

** Associate Professor, University of Prešov, Faculty of Management and Business, Department of Tourism and Hotel Management, Konštantínova 16, 080 01 Prešov, Slovakia. Email: daniela.matusikova@unipo.sk
ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6141-7454>



Source: Hamid et al. 2021.

Fig. 1: Key Concepts of the Intelligent Tourism Sector

Information technologies (for example, the Internet or mobile communications) contribute to the implementation of digital tourism within the new global information systems of tourism and smart tourism. Travel agencies are increasingly forced to reorient themselves to customer requirements and are actively trying to introduce information technology into their work (Abrate et al., 2020). The implementation of digital tourism tools is one of the options to attract foreign tourists, a way to help restore tourism after the COVID-19 pandemic, also a way to provide services and promote safety and comfort (Sharma et al., 2020; Gupta et al., 2023).

Digitization enables travel agencies access to practical marketing tools and the knowledge to use them properly to expand their target audience and increase awareness of travel agency products (Sharma et al., 2020). The expansion of digital marketing, in turn, allows entry into new markets, as well as the creation of a non-seasonal but constant flow of tourists. Thus, travel agencies can make profits throughout the year, not only during the high season (Solovei, 2022).

Travel agencies try to offer clients, future participants in tourism, not only the most attractive products and services (i.e. tours), but also try to implement the given process as high quality and as quickly as possible. It is therefore important to deliver the tour offer as quickly as possible and close the deal in the online (electronic) space. The smart environment, which creates synergy with digital marketing, makes it possible to realize this effort of travel agencies and, increasingly, a request from their clients. E-commerce in tourism is a virtual scenario where consumers, vendors and sellers meet without the need for physical contact (Florido-Benites, 2024).

Contributions related to the content of the given study are published on the international academic scene dominantly within the tourism industry, i.e. in the field of hotel management or gastronomy as in Wong et al., 2023; Pham, Duong, Nguyen, 2024 and others. So far, however, very few studies have been conducted focusing on travel agencies. Contributions aimed at the digitization of travel agencies in general (Chauhan & Singh, 2020; Sharma et al., 2020; Huslan, Rozaidy & Mohamed, 2023), in concrete digital tools in the work of a travel agency (Ukpabi, Aslam & Karjaluoto, 2019; Li et al., 2021; Zhu, Zhang & Jin, 2023; Gupta, 2021), digital skills of employees in general (Hsu, 2018; Sousa & Rocha, 2019), or they examine the digitalization of travel agencies from the perspective of clients (Talwar et al., 2020; Rolda, 2023; Gupta et al., 2023). Other alternative ones mainly include studies dealing with cyber interest (Florido-Benitez, 2024). However, very few studies have been carried out focusing on travel agencies, and for this reason, this study is dedicated to them and thus partially covers the lack in the market. The originality and contribution of the study lie precisely in this. Due to the above mentioned, the view and perception of travel agency employees on digital elements brings a touch of originality to the study.

Digital and Smart Tools and Their Application in Travel Agencies

Digitization can often help in the development of new activities to improve the service delivery process, simplify customer access to them, reduce the gap between the provider and the user, etc. (Solovei, 2022). There is no travel agency that has not become a participant in the digitization process (Abrate et al., 2020). Rolda et al. (2023) highlight the fact that even though many travel agencies have started to develop digitalization, most of them still have not fully exploited the potential of the emerging source of data and communication, especially regarding the potential of customer engagement. Digital transformation for travel agencies takes place in different ways (Abrate et al., 2020).

Digital marketing allows travel agencies (as tourism businesses) to carry out personalized marketing (Gupta 2021), sell customized products and provide information to customers directly through their websites and other digital tools (Sharma et al., 2020).

Digital Marketing Creates Various Effective Promotion Options

- *SEO (Search Engine Optimization)* - Optimization for search engines. It is the process by which websites are able to get to the top of search results, which ensures that the website is noticed by more users,

- *PPC* (pay per click) - One of the most effective, as in principle you pay for the ad only after it is clicked. The most used tool in Slovakia and in the world for this form of marketing is Google Ads,
- *Content Marketing* - It is about presenting a clearly defined audience, quality and creativity are important to achieve good results,
- *Email Marketing* - One of the most effective forms of digital marketing, sending emails to customers helps businesses stay ahead,
- *Social Networks* - Social networks are used for promotion and serve to connect the business with customers, increase brand awareness and increase website traffic (invelity.com 2020).

Innovations in Tourism and Travel Agencies

Hao et al. (2020) focused their studies on the impacts and post-pandemic measures affecting Chinese tourism. They concluded that the pandemic has increased the need for smart services on both the supply and demand sides of the industry. During the pandemic, people reoriented themselves to contactless services supported by a digital platform and smart technology, while it is expected that after the overall end of the pandemic, the given trend will not change, on the contrary, it will become more pronounced. Digital and intelligent tools eliminate the errors that can occur on the human side, thereby increasing the quality of services and their efficiency. At the same time, customer satisfaction will increase and, consequently, there will be an increase in demand. The study further states that the use of digital and intelligent technologies will also have a positive impact on the operation of tourism businesses and can contribute to cost reduction. At the same time, the pandemic accelerated the implementation of video calls, cloud collaboration and remote in the work area. Hsu (2018) as well as Sousa and Rocha (2019) claim that the implementation of digital and smart technologies will automate a significant part of administrative work and replace human work. It is assumed that the younger generation will continue these innovations.

Until recently, television, billboards, radio, newspapers, etc., were the most common and important tools for addressing potential customers. Although these tools are still currently used by businesses (including tourism), it is still to a lesser extent than it used to be. Currently, digital marketing prevails, as almost every individual uses the Internet. “Currently, we can talk about the peak of the social importance of mass media, and at the same time about the mutual interweaving of mass and network communication. Computer networks, network communication and electronic media take over the strategy of traditional media (press, radio, television), enrich their tactics with new technical possibilities and are quickly commercialized, which is why they are also used in marketing” (Štefko et al., 2013, p. 184).

Web, E-Mail

Websites and e-mail should facilitate holiday planning, make available the offer of tours and stays of travel agencies, or make information, photos and expand them in comparison to the catalogue offer. Make the otherwise time-consuming (showing up to a brick-and-mortar store), tedious process of discussing prices, tour packages, etc. much easier. Instead of calling or visiting travel agencies during business hours, travellers can find relevant information on the web and send questions by email at any time of the day (Murphy, Tan, 2003).

Travel agencies continue to use email marketing to maintain and long-term relationship with customers. Client email communications and email marketing, when set up correctly, are beneficial because of the precision with which emails can be customized, targeted and reached at relatively low cost to target segments (prospects for travel agencies). Digital processing allows companies to send a huge number of e-mails with offers of tours and stays (Baky, 2016) (according to the current legislation). Zahedifard (2012), shows the advantages of email marketing: You get most of what you invest, it is very meaningful, measurable, it is simple, it is automatic, it is fast and effective. On the other hand, the disadvantage of e-mail marketing: undelivered e-mail, disintegration of e-mail responses, rendering ability, e-mail overload, or misunderstanding of the message / offer.

The Importance of Social Media for Travel Agencies

Social media marketing has become a powerful tool for travel agencies to interact with clients (potential tourism participants). A travel agency that wants to communicate with both existing and potential clients should consider the importance of an active online presence (Gupta, 2021). There exist several ways to increase interest and, consequently, the sale of tours/stays, or to improve communication with clients through social networks. This includes creating a Facebook page, Twitter account, Instagram account, LinkedIn profile, etc. and subsequently publishing images, videos or infographics on them. When it comes to digital marketing, on the one hand, travel agencies can focus, for example, on sharing positive background, experiences and ideas in the destinations offered, on the other hand, mixing free dates in the offered destinations with positive feelings and experiences (which will support sales) (Benez, 2023).

Has (2020) describes how to promote business for travel agencies on social networks, Goshadze and Bara-Sánchez (2016) address the expectations of travel agencies regarding social networks and social networks as a feedback tool, Çalık (2020) states how a travel agency should reach clients on social media by transforming marketing strategies without additional costs.

Chatbots and Their Use in Travel Agencies

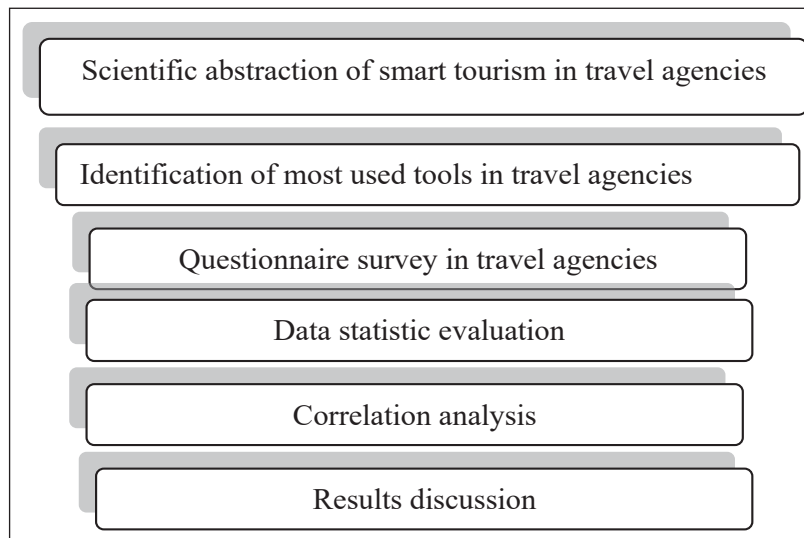
Customer service chatbots are applications that use artificial intelligence (AI) to interact with customers in an automated way via chat or messengers (Huslan et al., 2023). Technology is essential for many industries. Especially in the tourism and hospitality industry, chatbots are used to facilitate services such as reservations, recommendations, information, and other services (Ukpabi et al., 2019). In general, the tourism industry is one of many industries that can very well benefit from the services of chatbots, as (Li et al., 2021):

- Tourism is considered to be one of the areas to benefit the most from chatbot services, along with the financial and retail industries (FlowXO, 2020).
- Among industries, the tourism industry seems to have the largest percentage of people using web (online or mobile) services for their needs (more than 80%, while e.g. the financial and retail sector has around 70% of web service users) in depending on the products or services they offer (Dubrová, 2020; Milenkovic, 2020).
- The ability and capacity of chatbot services is constantly accelerating, especially in online travel agencies (chatbots operated by online travel agencies

or airlines can provide faster services to travellers during peak seasons with significantly increased accuracy and completion rate of reservations, answers to after-sales questions - i.e. related questions with reservation) (Gupta, 2019).

Chatbot services are developed and used mainly in the online space of travel agencies that also have standard store operations or exclusively in the case of purely online travel agencies. Chatbots are applied in repetitive tasks with which clients turn to travel agencies, what to know to reduce the costs of information services. At the same time, they aim to reduce the fear and discomfort of some users from using technical services by providing them with an interface that is more human-like (unlike the previous web / mobile self-service) (Uliyar, 2017).

One of the leading countries in the technological field is China, especially when it comes to various applications with the support of chatbots. For example, major online travel agencies in China (e.g. Ctrip.com, Qunar.com and Figgy.com and others) have already introduced chatbot services on their websites to better assist customers in booking tours and holidays as well as airline tickets (Jain et al., 2018; Li et al., 2021).



Source: Own processing.

Scheme 1: Methodology Step Scheme

METHODS AND METHODOLOGY

The aim of the study is to find out how the employees of travel agencies evaluate the tools of digital and smart communication used in practice when approaching the client with their tour offer.

The research hypotheses were created compactly with the aim of the research:

H1: Satisfaction with quality communication is related to the use of chatbots in travel agencies.

H2: The perception of increased interest in travel agencies' products is related to the effectiveness of using social networks.

H3: The speed of communication with the client is related to the efficiency of sending offers by e-mail.

The main research method was an author's questionnaire, which was distributed among travel agencies in the period February - July 2023. The period of data collection was chosen in relation to the ongoing evaluation of the provision of information provided by travel agency workers and separately with the reactions and answers of chatbots, which are monitored and evaluated (H1) as well as with the tracking of social media posts related to travel agency products (holidays and tours) (H2). The purpose of the compiled questionnaire was to find out what tools of digital communication are used by travel agencies to promote their products towards potential tourism participants, in what form they are presented, i.e. what tools they use and which they think are the most effective. The answers in the questionnaire were compiled on a Likert scale, where the respondents had to evaluate the statements on a scale from 1 - complete agreement to 5 - complete disagreement, choosing from several possible answers as well as open questions.

The selection of respondents was based on membership in the Slovak Association of Travel Agencies and Tour Operators (SACKA), which had 250 regular members (evidence from February 2023). Out of the total number of 250 travel agencies and tour operators, there were 175 travel agencies. Subsequently, those travel agencies that have and use selected digital tools were selected. All travel agencies use the web, social networks, and email, but only 132 travel agencies were identified in the case of chatbots. There were 117 respondents (N=117) who were willing to cooperate in the research and send the questionnaire. Given that Slovakia is a small country, the total number of respondents to the research is 88%. A total of 31 travel agencies were asked to participate in survey, where until the February 2023, chatbots were identified as part of their website. 21 travel agencies responded to the questionnaire.

The data obtained from the questionnaire were evaluated and presented in relative abundance, using a description, a contingency table, and for better clarity, tables in the Excel program. Since the testing of the normality of the variables (which enter the hypotheses) showed that they meet the requirement for a normal distribution, a correlation analysis, specifically the Pearson's correlation coefficient, was chosen for their testing.

$$r = \frac{\sum_{i=1}^n (x_i - \bar{x})(y_i - \bar{y})}{\sqrt{\sum_{i=1}^n (x_i - \bar{x})^2 \sum_{i=1}^n (y_i - \bar{y})^2}}$$

(Source: Vašaničová 2021, p.61)

Formula 1: Pearsons Correlation Coefficient

Pearson's correlation coefficient can take values from $<-1;1>$. Where a value of -1 means that all the points in the graph lie on a descending line, a value of 1 that the points

lie on an ascending line and a value of 0 that the points are scattered and thus there is no linear relationship between the variables (Vašaničová, 2021).

Table 1: Correlation Coefficient

Correlation Coefficient Value	Interpretation of the Correlation Coefficient
0.90 to 1.00 (-0.90 to -1.00)	very high correlation
0.70 to 0.90 (-0.70 to -0.90)	high correlation
0.50 to 0.70 (-0.50 to -0.70)	medium correlation
0.30 to 0.50 (-0.30 to -0.50)	low correlation
0.00 to 0.30 (0.00 to 0.30)	very low or no correlation

Source: Correlation coefficient, 2022. <https://fzsp.truni.sk/>

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A total of 117 representatives of different travel agencies (respondents) answered. On average, travel agencies have been operating at the market for 19.4 years. The longest operation of the travel agency was 45 years, the shortest operation was 5 years.

The respondents indicated the number of employees working in the travel agency, which included the positions of manager, direct sales officer, and other employees (internally employed accountant, etc.). Table 2 shows the number of employees of the central travel agency and its other places of operation.

Table 2: Number of Employees in Travel Agencies

No. of Employees	Relative Frequency %	Cumulative Relative Frequency %
Up to 5 employees	9.80%	9.80%
6 to 10 employees	24.40%	34.20%
10 to 15 employees	29.30%	63.50%
15 to 20 employees	26.80%	90.30%
more than 20 employees	9.80%	100%

Source: Own processing.

Respondents agree with the statement (Table 3) that customers use chatbots to find out basic information about travel agency products and communicate with them, with 14.60% of respondents completely agreeing and 46.30% of respondents somewhat agreeing. Rather, 19.50% of respondents disagreed with the use of chatbots on travel agency websites, and 19.50% of respondents completely disagreed with this statement. Based on the answers from

the respondents, it can be assumed that chatbots are used, while the rate of their use has a growing tendency.

Table 3: Satisfaction with Chatbot Communication and Clients - Evaluation of the Experience of Travel Agency Employees

	Relative Frequency %	Cumulative Relative Frequency %
Agree	14.60%	14.60%
Rather agree	46.40%	61.00%
Rather disagree	19.50%	80.50%
Disagree	19.50%	100%

Source: Own processing.

As for the quality of communication with chatbots, based on experience (i.e. solving poorly understood information, insufficient information, etc.), travel agency employees stated that 48% of clients positively evaluate the quality of communication with chatbots (20% absolutely and 28% rather satisfied). 28% were dissatisfied (20% rather dissatisfied / some strong proviso and 8% absolutely dissatisfied). According to respondents, 28% of clients who communicate with chatbots do not know how to formulate a question well, and therefore do not like to use them.

A total of 66% of respondents use social networks to promote travel agency products and communicate with clients (accumulated relative frequency of positive responses). 27% of respondents rather disagreed with the statement, while in the open question they specified in more detail that they primarily use social networks only to promote their products and monitor client reactions with minimal intervention. 7% of respondents completely disagreed with this statement (Table 4).

Table 4: Use of Social Networks by Travel Agencies

	Relative Frequency %	Cumulative Relative Frequency %
Agree	51.00%	51.00%
Rather agree	15.00%	66.00%
Rather disagree	27.00%	93.00%
Disagree	7.00%	100%
Don't want to answer	0%	

Source: Own processing.

Despite the fact that up to 95% of respondents mentioned that a website is dominant tool for them (in terms of presenting their products), 5% of respondents stated that they do not have a website and only use social networks (Facebook or

Instagram). These were respondents from the category of up to 5 employees.

As part of the investigation of the social networks use (promotion of travel agencies' products and communication with clients), 69% used Facebook and Instagram equally, 21% of respondents stated that the social network Facebook dominates in their operation, and only 10% prefer Instagram or Twitter as dominant social network.

Within any activity, its efficiency is important. In the case that the effort and activity expended over a certain period is not equal, or the effort is not lower than the positive effects obtained (increase in traffic to the site / social media, interest in products and sales of products, etc.), it is not possible to talk about the effectiveness of using social media, but rather about wasting human potential. 42% of respondents agree that activity on social networks regarding product promotion and communication with clients is effective. 43% of respondents are more inclined to the given option (rather agree). The rest of the respondents do not share a positive opinion regarding efficiency, as 11% of respondents rather disagreed and 4% expressed total disagreement.

Table 5: Effectiveness of the Use of Social Networks According to Respondents

	Relative Frequency %	Cumulative Relative Frequency %
Agree	41.00%	41.00%
Rather agree	44.00%	85.00%
Rather disagree	11.00%	96.00%
Disagree	4.00%	100%
Don't want to answer	0%	

Source: Own processing.

Given that various criteria can be assessed under the term "effective use of social networks", respondents were offered the most common criteria observed in practice (Table 5).

It can be seen from Table 5 that the respondents' most followed and most important "tools of social media effectiveness" are the increase of interest in the products of travel agencies (i.e. subsequent contacting of employees, possibly requesting additional information or booking a tour). It is interesting that fewer respondents emphasize monitoring feedback on social networks (for example, a tour / stay offer). These elements are especially important for travel agencies that have up to 5 employees and more than 21 employees, while we assume that the job position of an employee for social networks can be created (possibly the given activity can be provided by an external company). However, what travel agency employees monitor and evaluate is the number of "likes" under the published post.

Table 6: Contingency Table of Averages “Number of Workers” and “Effectiveness of Social Networks According to Selected Elements” - Averages

Number of Employees in the Travel Agency	Increasing Interest in the Products	Quick Communication with the Client	Commenting on New Posts	Like on New Posts	Feedback When Purchasing a Product
Up to 5 employees	1,19	1,79	2,07	1,27	1,79
6 to 10 employees	1,09	2,58	1,48	1,33	2,56
10 to 15 employees	1,47	2,12	2,16	1,73	2,89
16 to 20 employees	1,53	3,08	1,17	1,42	3,09
more than 20 employees	1,79	2,85	2,19	1,18	1,92

Source: Own processing.

Travel agency employees try to attract attention, especially of regular clients, by sending product (tour/holiday) offers directly by mail (direct marketing). The effectiveness of sending offers by e-mail in this way is very favourable for 24% of respondents and rather favourable for 39% of respondents. This has proven itself mainly for travel agencies with 11 to 15 employees (1.78) and over 21 employees (1.88). For 21% of respondents, sending offers of their products to clients is rather disadvantageous (dominated by a group of 6 to 10 workers - 3.99) and for 16% completely disadvantageous, while this method is implemented only in case of explicit request from the client (dominated by a group of number of 16 to 20 employees- 4.21) (Table 6).

Table 7: Effectiveness of the Use of E-Mail Communication According to the Respondents

	Relative Frequency %	Cumulative Relative Frequency %
Agree	24.00%	24.00%
Rather agree	39.00%	63.00%
Rather disagree	21.00%	84.00%
Disagree	16.00%	100%
Don't want to answer	0%	

Source: Own processing.

In hypothesis testing, alternative hypotheses were established and tested. The test results are in Tables 8, 9, 10.

Table 8: Hypothesis 1 Testing

Hypothesis	Pearson's Correlation Coefficient	P - Value	Significance Level	Correlation Strength	Verification / Falsification of the Hypothesis
H1	$r = -0,3214$	$p = 0,0405$	$\alpha = 0,05$	low correlation	verified

Source: Own processing.

Based on the results from Table 8, it can be concluded that there is a connection between satisfaction with the quality of communication and the use of chatbots in travel agencies (H1). Pearson's correlation coefficient is $r = -0.3214$ indicating a low correlation between the variables. A negative value of the correlation coefficient shows that there is an indirect linear relationship between the variables. From the conducted research, it can be concluded that chatbots

facilitate communication for travel agency employees, as they are able to provide the client with basic information, moreover, without a time limit. In the case, as stated in H1, if the quality of communication is satisfied for clients, they do not turn to travel agency workers with the same questions or others (Zhu et al., 2023). This has a significant impact on improving efficiency and redistributing the work of travel agency employees.

Table 9: Hypothesis 2 Testing

Hypothesis	Pearson's Correlation Coefficient	P - Value	Significance Level	Correlation Strength	Verification / Falsification of the Hypothesis
H2	$r = 0,7027$	$p = 0,0000$	$\alpha = 0,05$	high correlation	verified

Source: Own processing.

By testing H2, it can be concluded that there is a statistical connection between the perception of an increase in interest in the products of travel agencies and the effectiveness of the use of social networks. Pearson's correlation coefficient is $r = 0.7027$, which indicates a high correlation between the variables. A positive value of the correlation coefficient shows that there is a direct linear relationship between the variables. In view of the above mentioned, it can be concluded that for the respondents, social networks represent

an effective tool for promoting the products of travel agencies and possible communication with clients (Sousa & Rocha, 2019). Respondents identified increased interest in travel agency products as one of the most watched and significant components of social media effectiveness. The respondents explain this type of preference as a subsequent manifestation in contact with them (as travel agency employees) with a request for additional information or a tour reservation by the client.

Table 10: Hypothesis 3 Testing

Hypothesis	Pearson's Correlation Coefficient	P – Value	Significance Level	Correlation Strength	Verification / Falsification of the Hypothesis
H3	$r = 0,0295$	$p = 0,77060$	$\alpha = 0,05$	very low correlation	falsified

Source: Own processing.

Testing H3 showed that there is no statistical relationship between the speed of communication with the client and the effectiveness of sending offers using e-mail. Pearson's correlation coefficient is $r = 0.0295$, indicating a very low correlation between the variables. A positive value of the correlation coefficient shows that there is a direct linear relationship between the variables. Sending travel agency product offers (direct mail as part of e-mail marketing) is still a used method of informing potential clients in Slovakia. This is also confirmed by the results of the questionnaire, where 63% of respondents gave a cumulative positive answer. The advantages of e-mail marketing (that is, sending an offer by e-mail) are that it is targeted, measurable, personalized, available with relatively low costs. Considering the result of the tested hypothesis, it is possible to believe, as Murphy and Tan (2003) also claim, that this "traditional" element of digitization is gradually being replaced by new other tools, for example chatbots, which provide information to the client immediately and according to his preferences.

The limitation of the study is the absence of such a specific topic on the example of selected digital tools applied in travel agencies from the perspective of employees in the Slovak Republic (whereas foreign studies are also conceived differently). Due to the absence in domestic as well as foreign studies, it is difficult to make comparisons with the presented study. The studies are carried out mainly from the consumer's point of view in relation to the travel agency and the influence of digital tools.

CONCLUSION

New digital technologies have significant potential for a new definition of work within travel agencies. Their possibilities are expanding, and under this trend, the competences of their leaders, i.e. managers, are also expanding. With an increasingly demanding customer, in the form of a participant

in the tourism industry, it is important to know his needs and changing interests under the influence of many factors.

Advanced digital tools give travel agencies the opportunity to increase work efficiency, improve customer communication, gain greater insight into traveller preferences, and more. Managerial use of computerized reservation systems or global distribution systems is changing business management to a new direction. Automated processes were used not only in booking transport and accommodation services, but also in many others such as insurance services, booking and subsequent transport and many others.

The transition of work in travel agencies from manual processes to automated systems has increased its demands even for the employees themselves. They should improve their digital competences in terms of rapidly increasing digital tools. On the other hand, for the effective management of employees, it is essential that the management itself (managers) also improve their digital skills so that their businesses can constantly progress in a highly competitive market.

Overall, it can be assessed that the implementation of digital tools in the running of businesses such as travel agencies brings many managerial and competitive advantages. Among the most dominant ones can be mentioned, for example, speeding up processes, reservations, streamlining communication, expanding distribution channels, speeding up transactions, reducing costs, minimizing the rate of errors in standardized actions and this overall contributes to increasing the overall efficiency of work. With the increase in the number of digital tools, travel agency managers also have more time, which they can spend, for example, on searching for new options, creating new product packages, or even spending free time according to their preferences.

Digitization brings unprecedented opportunities for small and medium-sized enterprises in tourism. It offers opportunities to enter new markets, develop new tourism products and services, adopt new business models and processes, improve its position in global tourism value chains and integrate into digital ecosystems. The extent and use of digital technologies vary across countries, sectors, organizations, and locations. The digital age, which is currently developing dynamically, brings new forms of communication and means of sales support as well as opportunities to acquire new clients. Today it is already obvious that if travel agencies do not invest in digitization, they will not survive.

The travel agencies' communication with clients through chatbots tends to be an effective and innovative way to provide clients with answers to standard and basic questions at any time and to increase the efficiency of the travel agency's work (due to time savings). A bonus that travel agencies can move towards over time is, for example, that chatbots can be programmed to collect and process personal preferences of clients, which will enable the provision of more targeted and personalized offers. This, also according to the findings presented in the research (27% of clients do not know how to ask a chatbot the right question), also requires the acquisition of better skills when meeting clients in communication with chatbots.

Social networks allow travel agencies to reach a wide segment of clients (in addition, without border restrictions). Communication through social networks can be effective, fast, and low-cost. In the promotion of products (tour or stay) of travel agencies, social networks provide a wide range of creative campaigns that appeal to the client.

The increase and use of chatbots as well as social networks were confirmed in the testing of hypotheses (H1 and H2). Based on the results presented above, it is possible to warn and suggest to managers of travel agencies that chatbots can also be programmed to collect and process personal preferences of clients. This can enable travel agents to provide more targeted and personalized travel offers. Within social networks, it is possible to support the creativity of presenting the products of travel agencies (Dias, Melo & Patuleia, 2022). Emails are still an effective way to announce new offers, discounts, and promotions, as long as clients are interested in them. In today's fast-paced era, however, e-mail communication is moving more into the position of secondary communication (non-confirmation of H3), as there are several pitfalls that prevent a quick response to e-mail (for example, postponing the completion of e-mail for later, overlooking e-mail, late loading of e-mail into the post office due to a weaker Internet connection, etc.). Nevertheless, it still has its place in the communication between the travel agency and the client, in the form of notification (offer

for commission sellers, reminders to regular clients) or clarification (sending documents for the tour or instructions for the tour).

The contribution of the study lies in the theoretical contribution to the professional literature focused on the interaction and perception of travel agency employees and selected digital elements (for example, chatbots). The study offers a presentation of the motivation for the use of various digital techniques in travel agencies in Slovakia. Based on the study, further research can be carried out, which will provide a good opportunity to address other existing gaps in research focused on digital elements in travel agencies. The study shows that the introduction of selected digital elements can improve the working conditions of the staff, increase the quality of services thanks to the automation of routine processes, improve customer engagement (accessibility) and thereby increase their satisfaction.

The benefit of the study on a practical level consists in the transfer of knowledge into educational activities and to focus the attention of students, familiarize them and place emphasis on the practical parts of the educational process for the control and practical use of digital elements. At the same time, it draws attention in the theoretical part to cyber-attacks on tourism (Florido-Benítez, 2024). For the professional public, it underlines the importance of digitization for small and medium-sized enterprises in the field of tourism. Digital transformation offers new opportunities for market entry, development and innovation of new products and services, adaptation of new business models and processes, or integration into digital ecosystems.

It is obvious that Slovak travel agencies have embarked on the path of digitization and are using its elements, but based on the research results review, it can be concluded that they are not using them to the full extent, as for example the countries of China, India, the USA or selected countries of Western Europe. It is certain that if travel agencies do not go on the path of digitization in full form, they will have problems with competitiveness and long-term sustainability in the future, especially in relation to the international market.

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