

Adoption and Use of E-commerce by Small Businesses in the UK Tourism Industry

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Summary

This paper presents a quantitative study of 90 small tourism businesses in the South West of the United Kingdom. It examines the factors that influence the adoption and use of e-commerce and the types of e-business that these organisations undertake.

It confirms the influencing factors that have been identified in previous research in similar small to medium sized enterprises that determine business decisions to adopt and use e-commerce. It also finds that there was virtually no strategic use of e-commerce but that all organisations that were studied relied upon web-based activities in one form or another.

Finally we present a five point list of recommendations targeted at owner-managers of small tourism businesses to direct their future e-commerce strategies.

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Finally we present a five point list of recommendations targeted at owner-managers of small tourism businesses to direct their future e-commerce strategies.

Introduction

E-commerce is a pervasive Information Technology (IT) phenomenon in the information economy. It represents one of the most important and profound transformations that IT makes to our society in the way that business is conducted, managed and communicated. The uptake of Internet usage has increased rapidly in recent years. In the UK, 62% of the total population, 37.4 million people, use the Internet regularly. The UK is now 6th in the league table of internet-enabled countries, with 3.4% of global Internet users. The table is topped by the US with 19.2% of the world's Internet users and closely followed by China with 12.1% (Internet World Stats, 2007). Governments see the adoption of e-commerce and other information communication technologies (ICT) by Small Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs) as crucial since the vast majority of new jobs, some 80% in Europe during the 1990s, were generated by this sector (DTI, 2003). For these reasons the UK Government have been keen to ensure their actions and legislation encouraged more businesses to adopt e-commerce (Price Waterhouse Coopers, 2001; Zhu, 2006).

The rapid uptake of the Internet in recent years, where it is being used for pleasure and business, has meant that all businesses, irrespective of size, organisational form and industry sector, have begun to realise they could no longer escape from nor ignore, the fast developing digital economy. Information Communication Technologies (ICT), including the Internet and Web technologies, are increasingly recognised as a source of innovation and economic growth, and national ICT strategies have pushed towards further integration of IT and economic development policies to meet emerging challenges (OECD, 2006). The advent of international e-commerce is creating dramatic changes in the competitive markets for all types of businesses and SMEs in particular (Tiessen et al, 2001), forcing these businesses to adapt or re-engineer their core business processes. Although the Web offers these businesses an inexpensive way to access buyers around the world, it is not always clear how or why they are using the new technology.

The tourism industry is a prime example of a sector that has been profoundly impacted by IT. It is not just in the selling of packaged holidays to customers where there has been a decline in the need of travel agency services because technically-aware holidaymakers are now using the Web to book direct with the airlines, the hotels and other tourism providers (Raymond, 2001). It is also highlighted by the resurgence of more demanding domestic holidaymakers, using the Internet and the Web to research their holiday options, to seek out higher quality accommodation, more information on their chosen destination and to ensure their expectations will be met by their chosen option. Also due to the nature of tourism products, with their information intensity and intangibility, they are highly suitable for marketing and selling on the Web (Morgan et al, 2001). For small UK tourism businesses the competitive landscape is changing and uncertainty is increasing, with more and more businesses using the Internet and Web technologies to try and succeed in this evolving marketplace. Within this arena, understanding what factors influence small tourism businesses to adopt and use e-commerce and the type of business activities performed online have become important research areas.

Literature Review

E-commerce

Since its de-regulation as a data transmission media in the mid-1990s, the Internet has changed all the rules of business (Ranganathan, 2003) and to an extent the lives of everyone on the planet (Plant, 2000). There is however no single agreed definition of what e-commerce is. Some authors believe it is a compact word for a wide array of interconnected business concepts, technologies, and cultural phenomena (May, 2000). Turban et al (2006, p4) suggest it is “the process of buying, selling, or exchanging products, services or information via computer networks”. Daniel et al (2002) describe e-commerce as: “one of the most discussed topics in business today” and they go on to suggest “ it is already leading to the reshaping of customer and supplier relationships, the streamlining of business processes and in some cases, even the restructuring of whole industries”. This latter point has evidenced by Raymond (2001) who finds declining number of Canadian travel agents now that customers use the Internet to

search for information and make bookings for flights and accommodation themselves online.

Prior Studies on E-commerce Adoption by SMEs

A review of the literature identifies a number of studies that examine the factors influencing the adoption of various information technologies, including EDI, e-commerce, across various industries, and at different stages of the adoption lifecycle; summarised in Table 1.

Source	Influencing Factors	IT Studied	No. of SMEs in Study¹	Industries
Thong, 1999	CEO characteristics, IT characteristics, organisational characteristics, environmental characteristics	IT adoption	166 SMEs (n < 100)	Not specified
Mirchandani and Motwani, 2001	Enthusiasm of top management, compatibility, company's employees knowledge about computers	e-commerce adoption	62 SMEs (n < 200)	Not specified
Riemenschneider and McKinney, 2001	Attitude, subjective norm, perceived behavioural control	e-commerce adoption	184 SMEs (n < 500)	Defence, agriculture, oil and gas, manufacturing
Wang and Fesenmaier, 2006	Organisational characteristics, technology climate, Web marketing strategy	Web marketing	260 SMEs (n < 250)	Tourism Industry, convention and visitor bureaus
Zhu and Kraemer, 2005	Technology, organisation,	e-commerce adoption	624 SMEs (n < 500)	Different industries in

	environment	factors linked to use and value		developed and developing countries
Raymond, 2001	Environment, Marketing Strategy, Managerial Context, Organisational Context, Characteristics of e-commerce	e-commerce adoption	54 SMEs (n < 50)	Tourism industry, travel agents

Note: 1 – n represents the number of employees considered in the criteria to define an SME.

Table 1 – A summary of prior studies examining the factors which influenced IT adoption by SMEs

Enablers of E-commerce

According to the DTI's report 'Business in the Information Age: The International Benchmarking Study 2004' the most frequently cited reasons encouraging businesses to adopt e-commerce were (DTI, 2004):

- To increase the efficiency of their processes (cited by 22%)
- To improve communication with customers (cited by 18%)
- To keep up with progress (cited by 15%)

The Price Waterhouse Coopers 'E-commerce Impact Study for the Giftware Sector' conducted on behalf of the DTI also found internal factors, but different ones to the DTI, which positively influenced a businesses adoption and exploitation of e-commerce. These included the company's vision, culture, management attitude, understanding the benefits of e-commerce and the effect on brand image (Price Waterhouse Coopers, 2001). The differences between the factors could possibly be explained by the International Benchmarking Study taking a multi-industry perspective, whereas the Impact Study only concentrated on one industry. Alternatively, the difference could also be explained by the time differences between the two studies; the more recent 2004

study demonstrates how businesses have increased their awareness and knowledge of e-commerce, since 2001, when the first study was conducted, and the importance of factors have changed.

Barriers to E-commerce

In a study of e-commerce adoption barriers facing small businesses in Sweden and Australia, MacGregor and Vrazalic (2005) found that adoption barriers could be grouped depending on whether e-commerce was deemed to be “Too Difficult” to implement or “Unsuitable” for the organisation.

The Price Waterhouse Coopers study also identified a number of barriers which were holding businesses back from greater adoption and exploitation of e-commerce, including investment costs, a lack of funding, insufficient e-commerce skills, a lack of adoption by retailers (i.e. their trade customers), concerns over intellectual property rights and to also telecoms costs (Price Waterhouse Coopers, 2001). Cost as a barrier is also proposed by Turban et al (2002), who believe the rate of e-commerce adoption is directly related to cost. They state “as experience accumulates and technology improves, the ratio of e-commerce benefits to cost will increase, resulting in an even greater rate of e-commerce adoption” (2002, p173). In addition to cost, a survey by the e-Commerce Innovation Centre (eCIC), at Cardiff University, found other barriers which were preventing SMEs from adopting e-commerce (eCIC, 2006). This survey identified the following key factors:

- Not applicable / not required for business
- High set up costs
- Products/services not suitable for e-commerce
- Do not understand the issues
- Not enough skilled staff

The single greatest barrier was ‘Not applicable / not required for business’; this factor and ‘Products / services not suitable for e-commerce’ suggests that some business

owners still have a narrow, potentially limiting view of e-commerce as simply selling over the Internet.

E-commerce Usage

There appears to be a shortage of information within the extant literature on e-commerce usage, especially in terms of which factors influence the use of which ICT technologies. Many researchers seem to be fully engaged in the debate about the ‘yes/no’ adoption decision yet are not interested in exploring how and why it used. Rashid and Al-Qirim (2005) found that the perceived usefulness of e-commerce significantly influenced the usage of internal email (i.e. between employees), Intranet and Website technologies. The extent of external email usage (i.e. to communicate with external parties for business purposes) was influenced by the information intensity of products and services. In industries with high information content products and services, such as tourism for example, the SME would be more motivated to send large quantities of information about its products and services, in the most cost-effective manner. They also found that the perceived usefulness factor and SMEs size seemed to be the only drivers for website use. Thus, larger SMEs are more capable than smaller SMEs in using websites extensively. The greater the perceived advantages from using websites, the more likely it will be used by SMEs.

Business Activities performed by SMEs using e-commerce

As previously mentioned there have been a limited number of studies undertaken to date on the use of e-commerce by SMEs. The business activities performed online by SMEs characterise how e-commerce is being used. These studies are summarised in Table 2.

Business Activity	Prior Study
Providing information on the company	Hamill and Gregory (1997)
Providing information on goods or services	Webb and Sayer (1998) Dutta and Evrard (1999) Poon and Swatman (1999)
Taking orders	Webb and Sayer (1998) Dutta and Evrard (1999)

	Poon and Swatman (1999)
Receiving payment	Webb and Sayer (1998) Dutta and Evrard (1999)
Delivery (of digital goods or services)	Webb and Sayer (1998)
After sales service or contact	Webb and Sayer (1998)
Identifying new inventory suppliers	Dutta and Evrard (1999)
Ordering and payment of inventory purchasing	Dutta and Evrard (1999)
Non inventory purchasing (such as travel, stationery)	Dutta and Evrard (1999)
Communication (via email) with customers and suppliers	Hamill and Gregory (1997) Dutta and Evrard (1999) Poon and Swatman (1999)
Internal communication between employees	Hamill and Gregory (1997) Dutta and Evrard (1999) Poon and Swatman (1999)
Document and design exchange with customers or suppliers	Hamill and Gregory (1997) Dutta and Evrard (1999) Poon and Swatman (1999)
External information search (e.g. on competitors, regulations)	Hamill and Gregory (1997) Dutta and Evrard (1999)
Communication with shareholders and investors	Webb and Sayer (1998)
Advertising	Hamill and Gregory (1997) Dutta and Evrard (1999) Poon and Swatman (1999)
Recruitment	Webb and Sayer (1998)

Table 2 – E-commerce activities currently performed by SMEs, identified from prior studies.

Research Objectives

The literature review has highlighted a large quantity of prior research which has been undertaken on the wider scope of ICT and e-commerce diffusion and adoption by SMEs (Thong, 1999; Mirchandani and Motwani, 2001; Riemenschneider and McKinney, 2001; Roberts and Wood, 2002). What the literature review has also highlighted is the much smaller amount of research on the diffusion and adoption of e-commerce by UK SMEs (Drew, 2003; Ashworth et al, 2005; Fillis and Wagner, 2005). In particular, the literature review has highlighted the absence of research on the diffusion and adoption of e-commerce by SMEs in the UK tourism industry, with previous studies only being identified in Canada and the US (Lituchy and Rail, 2000; Raymond 2001; Tiessen et al, 2001; Ham, 2004).

The adoption of e-commerce by small businesses in the UK tourism industry is the key focus of this investigation. Raymond's (2001) research broke the problem down into the influencing factors which determine a businesses adoption and use of e-commerce; what businesses use e-commerce for, specifically which business activities are performed online and an examination of the relationship between the influencing factors and the business activities performed online.

It is therefore necessary to understand what factors influence small UK tourism businesses' adoption and use of e-commerce and so this forms the basis for the first research objective shown in Table 3.

Research Objective 1	Key research questions
To find out which influencing factors act on a small UK tourism business to determine its adoption and use of e-commerce and to understand their influence.	1a) Which influencing factors act on a small UK tourism business to determine its adoption and use of e-commerce? 1b) How do these factors influence adoption and usage of e-commerce?

Table 3 – Research Objective 1 and Associated Research Questions

For many small businesses, the adoption of e-commerce comes under the guise of implementing a Website for informational, transactional and strategic purposes (Standing et al, 1998). The activities performed online generally involved the use of Web technology but it was found that other technologies including email, EDI, search engines, the World Wide Web and the Internet in general, were also used. The use of the Internet for informational, transactional and strategic purposes by small businesses in the UK tourism industry needs to be fully explored because the literature review did not reveal any information on how this type of business used the Internet. This leads to research objective 2 – shown in Table 4.

Research Objective 2	Key research questions
To understand what small UK tourism businesses use the Internet for and to identify how dependent they are on the Internet.	2a) What type of business activities do small UK tourism businesses perform online? 2b) How dependent are these businesses on the Internet?

Table 4 – Research Objective 2 and Associated Research Questions

Methodology

Data Collection

A survey was chosen as the data collection tool because it allows the collection of a large amount of data from a sizeable population in an economical way (Saunders et al, 2003).

Business owners were contacted by letter rather than by ‘cold calling’ since there was no information available to suggest when a convenient time was in a small business owner’s busy day to contact them or visit their business premises.

Pilot Study

The covering letter and questionnaire were first of all piloted amongst a number of known small business owners who let their properties to tourists, who know the researcher personally. Each person who took part in the pilot agreed to give impartial feedback on the research instruments. The feedback given on the questionnaire and covering letter was used to make changes which resulted in new versions being produced.

Findings

210 questionnaires were distributed to small tourism businesses in Gloucestershire, Devon and Somerset, who advertise in Tourist Information Centre brochures and use the enjoyEngland quality grading system. A response was received from 107 owner-managers who completed and returned a questionnaire. Out of the 107 responses, there were 4 questionnaires which were unusable. Out of the remaining 103 responses, 90 businesses had a website and 13 did not, representing 87% and 13% respectively. Thus, 90 small businesses were used as the basis for the following data analysis, giving a response rate of 42.85%.

Discussion of Findings for Research Objective 1

Several factors were found to influence a small tourism businesses adoption and use of e-commerce and these are listed in Table 5, with prior studies which included equivalent factors listed alongside.

Influencing Factors Identified by this Study	Equivalent Factors found in Prior Studies
Competitive Intensity	Competition (Environmental Characteristics) – Thong, 1999 Competitive Pressure (Environmental Context) – Zhu and Kraemer, 2005 Environmental Uncertainty (Environmental Context) – Raymond 2001
Market Products/Service Online	Distribution (Marketing Strategy) – Raymond 2001
Communication	Communication (Marketing Strategy) – Raymond 2001

Effectiveness	
Owner-managers Experience	CEO's IS Knowledge (CEO Characteristics) – Thong, 1999 CEO's Enthusiasm towards IS (No construct) – Mirchandani and Motwani, 2001 Owner-managers Experience (Managerial Context) – Raymond, 2001
Business Opportunities	Information Intensity (Organisational Characteristics) – Thong, 1999
Technology Innovation	CEO's Innovativeness (CEO Characteristics) – Thong, 1999 Advantages of E-commerce (Characteristics of E-commerce) – Raymond, 2001

Note: The construct associated with the factor is shown in brackets

Table 5 – A list of influencing factors identified by this study and equivalent factors in prior studies.

The data analysis shows a number of factors which have a major effect on the decision to adopt and use e-commerce. Small businesses with a more positive attitude toward the Internet and Web technologies will be more likely to adopt e-commerce (Grandon and Pearson, 2004). This is also corroborated by owner-managers viewing tourism products/services as being easy to market online, the Internet being an highly effective communication channel, the Internet providing opportunities for their business to grow and the new technology helping their business succeed by innovating. Lastly, the key decision-maker must view the Internet and Web technologies favourably. They can really only achieve this by having experience and knowledge of the Internet and understand what it is capable of. These results provide support for Rogers' innovation diffusion theory in the small business context (Rogers, 1995). In the study by Thong (1999), he found small businesses with CEO's and employees who are more knowledgeable about IT are more likely to adopt them. Mirchandani and Motwani (2001) found that the enthusiasm of top managers/CEO toward e-commerce and their knowledge of it discriminated between adopters and non-adopters.

This study finds that competitive intensity was a key influencing factor but this did not agree with Tong's (1999) findings. To explain his finding he suggested that the competitiveness of the environment does not provide any direct "push" for small businesses to adopt IT. However, Zhu and Kraemer (2005) found that competitive pressure was significant for developed countries but not developing ones. Whereas Raymond (2001) found competitive pressures and environmental uncertainty were key influencing factors when travel agents were deciding to adopt e-commerce and they did it for "reasons of survival" and "competitive necessity".

In terms of fulfilling the first research objective, the results have identified which influencing factors act on a small UK tourism business to determine its adoption and use of e-commerce. Some insight has been obtained to understand their influence but it is thought greater apprehension is needed to really appreciate how these factors are influencing small tourism businesses adoption and use of e-commerce.

Discussion of Findings for Research Objective 2

The results have shown that small tourism businesses use the Internet and Web technologies for around 4 information business activities (mean = 3.67), typically around 2 transactional activities (mean = 2.25) and virtually no strategic activities (0.94). In research conducted by other authors, equivalent activities have been found which support the findings of this study, shown in Table 6.

Type of Business Activities Identified by this Study	Equivalent Activities found in Prior Studies
Informational <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Providing information • Receiving enquiries • Advertising the business 	Dealing with customer enquiries – Poon and Swatman, 1999 Promotion of products/services and customer service facilities – Webb and Sayer, 1998
Transactional <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Receiving bookings • Sending a booking confirmation 	Obtaining orders for products online - Poon and Swatman, 1999 Processing of business transactions – Webb and Sayer, 1998

Strategic <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Forming alliances** • Tapping into new markets** 	Operation of interorganisational supply chain networks – Ranganathan, 2004 To enter new businesses or markets – Hsu et al., 2006**
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Note: ** these are weak findings with low responses

Table 6 – The type of business activities identified by this study and equivalent activities in prior studies.

The most important informational activities performed online included providing information to customers, receiving enquiries from customers and advertising the business. Poon and Swatman (1999) found in their study that dealing with customer enquiries was a major activity for SMEs in Australia. While Webb and Sayer (1998) discovered the main business purpose of Northern Ireland Websites was the promotion of products and services.

The two major transactional activities performed online included receiving bookings from customers and then sending a booking confirmation back to them. These findings were corroborated by Poon and Swatman (1999) who found the most important transactional function of Australian SME websites was obtaining orders for products online. Similarly, Webb and Sayer (1998) found that processing of business transactions online was a major value-creation activity for Northern Ireland SMEs, although this was mainly by an email form available from the website or for businesses dealing with the US, via a fully integrated ‘shopcart’ facility on their website.

In the results, the activity with the lowest response was receiving payments online and this finding was supported by other studies. Poon and Swatman (1999) found in their study that traditional transaction methods (i.e. cash, cheques and customer accounts) were being used in preference to using the Internet for financial transactions. The reasons given by their participants included: some concerns over lack of security; the traditional ways are robust and sound when volumes are not too high; and the banks do not currently provide a full range of Internet payment systems.

Although the results show virtually no strategic activities are being performed online by small UK tourism businesses, there were two very weak majorities (both 33%) identified in the results, covering: forming alliances with suppliers and partners, and tapping into new markets. Scanning the prior studies of Internet and Web technology innovation, strategic business activities did not feature in most of the studies, except for Hsu et al. (2006) and Ranganathan et al. (2004). The study by Hsu et al. (2006) highlighted a few businesses which used the Internet for launching new businesses or entering new markets but this activity had a very low response in their study. In the study by Ranganathan et al. (2004) the operation of interorganisational supply chain networks was a major activity performed by all businesses in their study. This evidence was considered to be biased because their research sample only included businesses which had already implemented Web technologies in Supply Chain Management.

The results highlighted that all (n = 90) small tourism businesses are dependent on the Internet for day to day business activities. Searching the literature related to Internet and Web technology innovation has highlighted an absence of any research on UK SME business dependence on the Internet.

In terms of fulfilling the second research objective, the results have identified what small tourism businesses use the Internet for, by identifying what type of business activities are performed online, as well as the most important activities in each category. The level of dependency on the Internet has also been identified and discussed.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The first research objective shows the influencing factors of competitive intensity, online service, effective communication, owner-manager's experience, business opportunities and technological innovation which act on small UK tourism businesses in determining their adoption and use of e-commerce. The influencing factors identified in this study confirmed those found in other studies in different sectors and

environments as being key determinants in a businesses decision to adopt and use e-commerce.

The second research objective finds the business activities which were found to act on small UK tourism businesses in determining their adoption and use of e-commerce. The analysis showed that the majority of small UK tourism businesses are primarily using the Internet and Web technologies for informational activities, with some transactional activities involving receiving bookings and sending confirmations taking place. The study found that virtually no strategic activities were being performed, and if they were, a small minority of businesses were forming alliances and tapping into new markets this way. The results showed that all small UK tourism businesses were dependent on the Internet for day to day business activities, in one form or another.

The results produced by this study, will help stakeholders involved with advising or supporting small UK tourism businesses, to appreciate the differences that exist and how small businesses in the tourism industry are adopting and using e-commerce, instead of using 'blanket approaches' and treating these SMEs as one homogenous group.

Finally, the findings from this study will help owner-managers of small tourism businesses to understand what their peers are doing in terms of e-commerce adoption and usage. There follows a list of recommendations, targeted at owner-managers of small tourism businesses, which have been derived from the literature review and the results of this study:

1. Ensure the Internet is being used as an effective marketing and communications tool. Use email and the website to fully interact with customers and to pass on details of the tourism products/services which are available.
2. Change business processes to fully utilise the Internet and Web technologies which are currently available to the business.

3. Consider moving customer retention strategies online. Using email or a website is more cost effective and has a wider reach than other means to stay in touch with previous customers
4. Seek support and guidance from technology suppliers and partners by implementing more technically-demanding transactional functions, such as online availability checking, online booking and automatic confirmations, to meet the needs of demanding customers.
5. Increase knowledge and understanding of strategic activities which could be performed online and consider opportunities which have a good fit with the business.

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