

KNOWLEDGE DEVELOPMENT IN TOURISM DISTRIBUTION CHANNELS: FROM SINGLE CHANNEL TO OMNICHANNEL

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to examine the periodic changes within the content of tourism distribution channels and identify key themes in this field. The study will be able to identify changes and trends by examining through scientific/academic research. A bibliometric method was employed. About 6245 publications in the Web of Science database were analyzed using VOS viewer, as the study tool. The results show an increasing trend in scientific publications on distribution channels in field of tourism by the last decade. The year 2019 held highest rank in terms of the total number of scientific papers published per year with 813 articles, and the highest citation rate belongs to 2017 with 10037 citations. Also, the majority of the publications in this field were original research articles (57.90%), and Law R., Buhalis D., Pan B., and Xiang Z. were identified as the most productive and most-cited researchers. Besides, co-authorship network visualization of journals in the field of tourism distribution channels was implemented. Co-word analysis was then used to track the evolution of research themes over time. The key themes are Single-channel, Dual-channel, Multi-channel, Cross-channel, and Omni-channel. Finally, this study calls for future research in the field of tourism distribution channels.

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INTRODUCTION

While there are numerous approaches towards epistemological understanding and scientific knowledge of a domain, a typical approach involves researchers' analysis and the content of journals (Hall, 2011). Over the past couple of decades, various efforts have been made to determine the most productive and influential researchers, institutions, and journals in the field of tourism, including ranking tourism journals, researchers, and institutions in terms of productivity and the number of citations (Ryan, 2005; Jamal et al., 2008; McKercher, 2008; Hall, 2011; Benckendorff & Zehrer, 2013; Johnson & Samakovlis, 2019).

Yet, all of these studies have addressed tourism with a macro perspective; and some scholars reported no progress in the subfields of tourism research (Koseoglu et al., 2016). Thus, a research gap has opened up between what has been done and what some researchers expect to be done –which is studying subfields of tourism management. At this level, tourism distribution decisions are regarded among the most significant subfields of tourism (Buhalis, 2000). Research in the tourism distribution literature is asymmetrical (Pearce & Schott, 2005) and due to the quick changes in the technology and business environment, findings of previous research may not exactly reflect the present situation (Law et al., 2015). Also functionally, the useful use of channels of distribution depends on an adequate understanding of the evolution of these channels in the tourism industry (Kracht & Wang, 2010). Bibliometrics is a tool for analyzing how disciplines have evolved based on intellectual structure, social structure, and conceptual structure (Koseoglu et al., 2016) which is rarely used in tourism research and has potential if applied (Pestana et al., 2020). Therefore, this study uses bibliometrics in order to examine the evolution of tourism distribution channels as one of the most important subfields of tourism that has not been studied so far. It would be useful to detail the contributions of the study to theory and practice. In this regard, academic publications are reviewed in the WOS (Web of Science) database (Li et al., 2018) on the topic of tourism distribution channels from 1983 to 2020. Co-occurrence and co-citation analysis are used to explore research themes and future research agendas (Pestana et al., 2020). This study makes several contributions:

- By using bibliometric analysis, a comprehensive understanding of the evolution of tourism distribution channels over a period of 37 years is provided for researchers.

- We used bibliometric analysis to develop the subfields of tourism research (Koseoglu et al., 2016). This research covers a lengthy publication in tourism distribution channel research by using a syntactic of keyword co-occurrence and co-citation analysis.
- In order to create a database and provide results, we use the world's leading scientific citation search and analytical information platform, Web-of-Science (WoS) (Li et al., 2018); and
- We provide a clear understanding of key themes in the evolution of tourism distribution channels (Kracht & Wang, 2010) which will assist researchers in future research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Tourism distribution

Jorgensen (2017) considers distribution in the field of tourism as a dynamic and continuous process of intermediaries in a communication. In general, a channel refers to different ways of interacting with the customer, and different types of channels, ways of transmitting a product or information. But what is neglected is that the types of channels for various interactions with customers are different during the customer purchasing process and are managed by several agents. Therefore, tourism distribution includes channels and consumer touchpoints with the brand. Touchpoints are all direct and indirect consumer interactions with a brand (Rosenbaum et al., 2017).

What is bibliometric analysis?

Bibliometric analysis was first introduced in 1969 and afterward was acknowledged as the quantitative analysis of bibliographic characteristics of a collection of literature for identifying measures including academic productivity rate of researchers, countries, institutions, journals, collaborative networks, old paradigm and paradigm shift, visualization of scientific productions by diverse bibliographic maps (Khasseh et al., 2016; Vosner et al., 2016). Sengupta (1988) refers to bibliometrics as classification, organization, and quantitative analysis of publication. Bibliometrics is a means for analyzing how disciplines evolve according to conceptual, social, and intellectual structures (Koseoglu et al., 2016). Bibliometrics considers research information including citations, author names, keywords, research methods, and statistical techniques used from written publications such as books, conference proceedings, journals, and articles (McBurney & Novak,

2002). Zupic and Čater (2015) suggest that bibliometric methods complement traditional paper-based methods of literature review and raise the objectivity of such studies. Bibliometrics is used for assessing the publication performance of authors and institutions and by mapping the structure and dynamics of the sciences via data (Cobo et al., 2011).

Bibliometrics in tourism research

Bibliometrics represents an increasingly important topic in tourism studies (Jiang et al., 2019; Johnson & Samakovlis, 2019; Nusair et al., 2019). A variety of reasons account for this, including tourism studies growth being reflected as a scientific discipline, researcher engagement, journal publication reviewing tourism literature, and evaluation of research performance (Hall, 2011). Since bibliometric studies are applied for developing the hierarchy of authors, journals, and research quality, they have been among the topics of vital importance in tourism, just like in other academic fields (Page, 2005; McKercher et al., 2006). Koseoglu et al. (2016) in a study entitled "Bibliometric Studies in Tourism", reviewed articles in top tourism and hospitality journals. The period under review was until 2014, and the top 5 journals in the field of tourism and the top 4 journals in the field of hospitality were selected for review. Benckendorf and Zehrer (2013) identified researchers and leading research activities in a study entitled "Tourism Research Network Analysis" using network analysis. Bibliometric techniques have been used in this study. Hall (2011), in a study entitled "Bibliometric Analysis, journal Ranking, and Evaluating the Quality of Tourism Research," reviewed articles from the Scopus and SCImago databases. In this study, only some of the bibliometric issues related to the evaluation of the quality of research in tourism and the ranking of journals have been investigated.

METHODOLOGY

Bibliometric analysis is performed on the dataset (Ruhanen et al., 2019). Bibliometrics helps researchers identify major themes through literature reviews (Leung et al., 2017). The use of keyword lists in bibliometric studies makes it possible to search comprehensively in tourism and non-tourism journals (Vizcaino & Díaz, 2019). To identify publications from 1983 to 2020, the titles of the papers, together with their abstracts and keywords, were searched on December 25, 2020, in searches of web of science (WOS). The scope of current study includes such terms as:

“Tourism Distribution Channel” and closely related semantic terms such as “Distribution Channel,” “Distribution,” “Channel,” “Channel of distribution,” “Intermediate,” “Operator,” and “Supply chain,” together with subject area terms such as “tourism,” “tourist,” “hospitality,” “Leisure,” “hotel,” “tour” and “travel.”

Bibliometrics involves various methods of analysis (Van Raan, 2005; Leung et al., 2017). Co-word (keyword co-occurrence) analysis, co-authorship analysis, and citation-based analysis are the most frequently used methods of analysis (Van Eck & Waltman, 2014; Leung et al., 2017;). In this research, citation and co-citation analysis, journals, and authors analysis; analysis of countries and institutions; and co-occurrence analysis of keywords were used. The initial sample included 6245 publications. Analysis was performed with the VOS viewer. The VOS display provides a graphical representation of the network display, and there are two features for an item: "links" (the number of links that one item refers to the other) and "total link strength" (total link strength to other items) (Leong et al., 2020).

In this research, citation and co-citation analysis, authors and journals analysis and analysis of institutions and countries are used to show the hybrid image of the knowledge collection of tourism distribution channels, also co-word and co-occurrence analysis are applied to manifest the thematic and themes evolution of this study field.

RESULTS

Publications by genres and years

Table 1 shows the published studies (6245 studies) in the field of tourism distribution channel by genre between 1983 and 2020. A review of the results of the table shows that studies have been conducted in four different genres. Most types of documents are related to articles (3880) and proceedings papers (2131) which account for 96.253% of the total publications. Therefore, it can be concluded that most of the studies conducted in this field are articles and proceedings papers, on the other hand, the researchers prefer review and evaluation publications less.

According to Figure 1, since 2008, the number of publications in the field of tourism distribution channels has been increasing. The number of publications in 2019 has reached 813, which stands for a significant amount of research. This can be for two main reasons. 1) Increasing the number of scientists in the world in the field of tourism distribution channels. 2)

Facilitate collaboration between researchers and information gathering through advances in the Internet and computer technology (Merigo et al., 2015; Leong et al., 2020).

Table 1. *Distribution of the publications by genres*

Document Types	Frequency (n)	(%)
Article	3,880	62.130
Proceedings Paper	2,131	34.123
Review	195	3.123
Editorial material	39	0.624
Total	6245	100

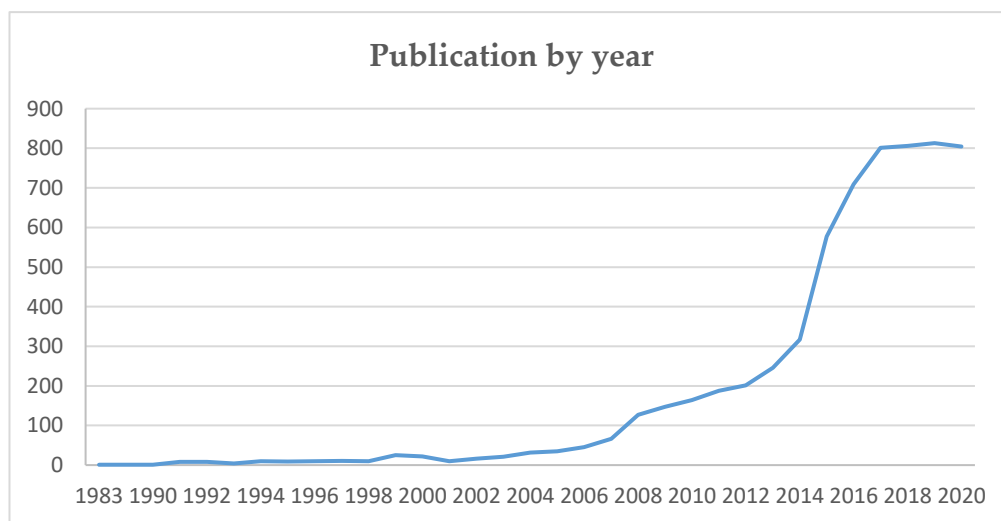


Figure 1. *Yearly number of publications*

Citation analysis and Co-citation network

Table 2 presents the characteristics of the top five most cited articles between 1983 and 2020. Article with the title "The Role of Social Media in Online Travel Information Search" is the most cited article with 816 citations. This article was published by Xiang and Gretzel (2010) in the journal of *Tourism Management*.

From the cited sources in articles on tourism distribution channels, the journal co-citation network is divided into 4 clusters, each depicted in distinct color in Figure 2. Also, the source co-citation network showed that *Tourism Management*, *Journal of Travel Research*, and *Annals of Tourism Research*, are the three most frequently co-cited journals.

Table 2. *Characteristics of the nine most cited articles on tourism distribution channels*

Title	Authors	Source Title	Publication Year	Total Citations	Average per Year
Role of social media in online travel information search	Xiang, Z., & Gretzel, U	Tourism Management	2010	816	81.6
Predicting the present with google trends	Choi, H., & Varian, H	Economic Record	2012	454	56.75
The impact of online reviews on hotel booking intentions and perception of trust	Sparks, B. A., & Browning, V	Tourism Management	2011	400	44.44
The impact of online user reviews on hotel room sales	Ye, Q., Law, R., & Gu, B	International Journal of Hospitality Management	2009	399	36.27
Smart cities of the future	Batty, M., Axhausen, K. W., Giannotti, F., Pozdnoukhov, A., Bazzani, A., Wachowicz, M., ... & Portugali, Y	European Physical Journal Special Topics	2012	385	48.13
The influence of user-generated content on traveler behavior: An empirical investigation on the effects of e-word-of-mouth to hotel online bookings	Ye, Q., Law, R., Gu, B., & Chen, W	Computers in Human Behavior	2011	319	35.44
Exceptional ballistic transport in epitaxial graphene nanoribbons	Baringhaus, J., Ruan, M., Edler, F., Tejada, A., Sicot, M., Taleb-Ibrahimi, A., ... & Tegenkamp, C	Nature	2014	296	49.33
Destination image representation on the web: Content analysis of Macau travel related websites	Choi, S., Lehto, X. Y., & Morrison, A. M	Tourism Management	2007	295	22.69
Social Media in tourism and hospitality: A literature review	Leung, D., Law, R., Van Hoof, H., & Buhalis, D	Journal of Travel & Tourism Marketing	2013	282	40.29

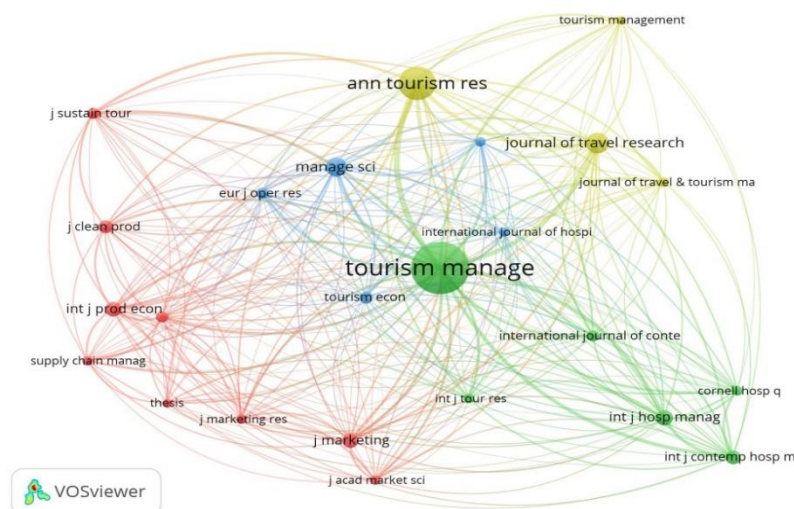


Figure 2. *Source co-citation network*

Table 3. Top 24 leading journals, authors, institutions and countries

R	Journal	TP	Author	TP	Institution	TP	Country	TP
1	Tourism Management	134	Law, R.	81	Hong Kong Polytech	123	Usa	968
2	Lecture Notes In Computer Science	85	Buhalis, D.	24	Bournemouth Univ	44	China	726
3	Int. Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Man.	80	Pan, B.	18	Queensland	39	Spain	363
4	Journal of Travel&Tourism Mar.	70	Xiang, Z.	18	Univ Cent Florida	37	England	352
5	Journal of Travel Research	47	Zhang, Y.	14	Temple Univ	35	Australia	253
6	International Journal of Hospitality Man.	42	Chung, N.	13	Harbin Inst Technol	34	Italy	215
7	Annals of Tourism Research	36	Fesenmaier, Dr.	12	Univ Granada	33	Taiwan	196
8	Transportation Research Record	36	Gretzel, U.	12	Penn State Univ	32	India	152
9	Information Technology & Tourism	35	Wang, Y.	12	Purdue Univ	30	Germany	138
10	Asia Pacific Journal of Tourism Research	33	Li, X.	11	Kyung Hee Univ	29	Canada	134
11	Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences	32	Yang, Y.	11	Univ Florida	26	France	115
12	Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Technology	31	Cantoni, L.	10	Univ Illinois	26	Malaysia	101
13	International Journal of Tourism Research	30	Chen, Cc.	10	MIT	23	Portugal	101
14	Sustainability	30	Huang, L.	10	Univ Valencia	23	South Korea	91
15	Current Issues in Tourism	27	Inversini, A.	10	Chinese Acad of Sci	22	Japan	88
16	Journal of Destination Marketing & Management	27	Kim, S.	10	Bucharest Univ of Economic Studies	21	Greece	80
17	Transportation Research Part C: Emerging Technologies	27	Li, J.	10	Griffith Univ	20	Indonesia	80
18	Journal of Hospitality Marketing & Management	26	Li, L.	10	Monash Univ	20	Romania	78
19	PLOS ONE	24	Liu, Y.	10	Peking Univ	20	Switzerland	75
20	Cornell Hospitality Quarterly	23	Marine-Roig, E.	10	Virginia Tech	20	Netherlands	70
21	Advances in Social Science, Education and Humanities Research	21	Okumus, F.	10	Xiamen Univ	20	Austria	64
22	Tourism Economics	21	Park, S.	10	Columbia Univ	19	Brazil	60
23	Springer Proceedings in Business and Economics	20	Rita, P.	10	Univ Washington	19	Sweden	58
24	Tourism Management Perspectives	20	Schuckert, M.	10	Zhejiang University	19	Turkey	58

Notes: R = rank; TP = total number of publications

Most prolific journals, authors, institutions, and countries

We used the citation criteria of each journal to analyze the most productive journals and their impact by using WOS report. In terms of the most prolific authors based on total publications, Law, R. (The Hong Kong

Polytechnic University, China) tops the list with 81 records followed by Buhalis, D. (Bournemouth University, United Kingdom) with 24 records (Table 3). Among the most productive institution, Hong Kong Polytechnic University stands first with 123 scientific outputs and Bournemouth University with 44 scientific outputs, and Queensland University having 39 published works are ranked second and third, respectively (Table 3). According to the country analysis, the total number of scientific productions being retrieved consisted of 25 countries. The United States produced the highest number of scientific publications worldwide, with 968 articles (21.308%), followed by China (15.981%), Spain (7.99%), England (7.748%), and Australia (5.569%), all as the top five academically productive countries.

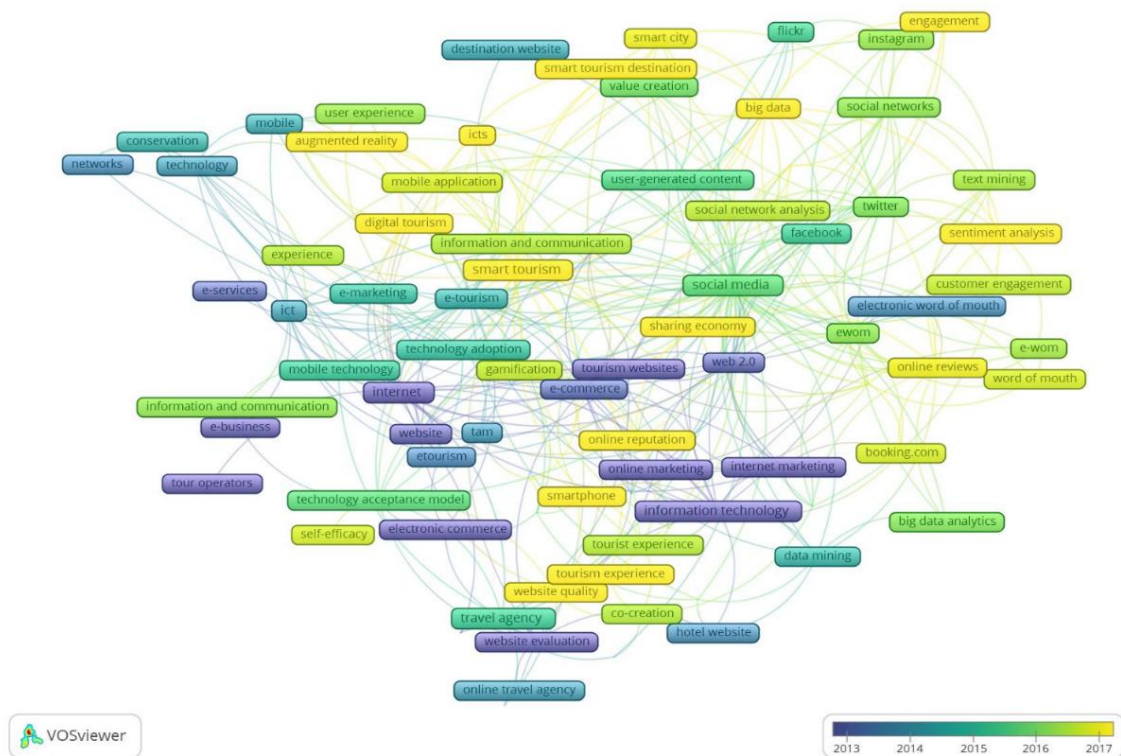


Figure 3. Co-word network of tourism distribution channel

Research themes

We used keyword analysis in this study because this type of analysis and its synchronization makes it possible to draw the subjective structure of a field and its changes for a period of time (Ding et al., 2001). In addition, the use of keywords in different periods helps to identify the research process (Pestana et al., 2020). Therefore, we analyzed all the keywords to examine their relationship with the research flow of the "Tourism Distribution

Channel". It should be noted that we have removed irrelevant keywords on the assumption that they are not related to the topic. Finally, a final sample of 674 associated keywords was obtained. Figure 3 presents the visualized co-word network. Bubble size indicates the number of frequencies and line thickness indicates the synchronous power of the keywords (Leung et al., 2017). The five themes of keywords were identified as *single-channel*, *dual-channel*, *multi-channel*, *cross-channel*, and *omnichannel* (Table 4).

Table 4. *Tourism distribution channel research thematic evolution*

Themes 1&2	Keywords 1983-2013	Themes 3&4	Keywords 2014-2015	Themes 5	Keywords 2016-2020
Single channel & Dual channel	tour operators Website online service online travel agency Information technology adoption Internet Web 2.0 online tourism	Multi-channel & Cross-channel	social media networks Twitter Instagram Facebook travel agency user-generated content (UGC) mobile technology Flickr Booking.com	Omnichannel	smart tourism augmented reality Gamification Tourist involvement tourist experience collective economy online browsing mobile applications smartphone self-efficacy

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This study provides an overview of the history of tourism distribution channels in the WOS database between 1983 and 2020. Different bibliometric variables are used, such as the most productive authors, journals, nations, and organizations, to conduct bibliometric studies of publications. Bibliometric analytic methods (keywords, co-word, citation, and co-citation analyses) were used to review published tourism distribution channel publications in this study. The hybrid image of the knowledge collection and the thematic evolution of tourism distribution channel research were explored.

Regarding the trends in scientific productions, the overall number of articles published before 2007 was less than 66, and it has gradually increased, as shown in Figure 1. The largest increase in the growth rate and several publications occurred from 2008 onwards. Concerning several citations per year, the results depicted an increasing trend with a modest positive slope until 2009, while from 2009 to 2020, the slope became steeper. The documents examined in the present study mostly include journal articles. The top journals listed in order of productivity are as follows: *Tourism Management*, *Lecture Notes in Computer Science*, *Journal of Travel Tourism Marketing*, *Journal of Travel Tourism Marketing*, and

Journal of Travel Research. The most productive authors are Law, R., Buhalis, D., Pan, B., and Xiang, Z. This study highlighted the top five countries producing the greatest amount of academic papers on the topic, namely the United States, China, Spain, England, and Australia.

Based on categorization existing in the retailing literature about distribution channels, this research analyzed thematic trends of tourism distribution channel research by categorizing keywords into five themes. As shown in Table 4, the five themes of keywords are Single channel & Dual channel, Multi-channel & Cross-channel, and Omnichannel. In the next section, each of these themes will be reviewed and finally, the future research trends (Agenda) will be stated.

Single and dual channel distribution

It can be concluded that the trends in scientific development in the case of tourism distribution channels were initially aimed at single-channel distribution (physical distribution or Internet-based distribution). If a company obtains 100 percent of its sales from a single channel, thus, it is called single channel distribution (Coelho et al., 2003). A large number of wholesalers were encouraged by the introduction of e-commerce, in addition to the conventional retail channel (e.g., physical tour operators), to sell products via a web-based channel (e.g., website or online travel agency) which is called dual-channel distribution (Chiang, 2010; Lu & Liu, 2015). Wholesalers and online retailers offer the same product in a dual-channel distribution system, and the client chooses the channel that best meets his or her needs (Chiang, 2010).

Multi and cross channel distribution

The second paradigm, as shown in the diagram, namely multi and cross-channel distribution, wholesalers, in today's world, are not solely relying on an incumbent retail channel and internet-based channel and have employed third-party channels such as social media, social networks like Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, Booking.com, mobile technologies, user-generated content, and Flickr to supply products and services of tourism. The distribution system encountered some changes with these channels being introduced and integrated with online and offline retailing (Verhoef et al., 2015). If there is no integration across channels, it is referred to as a multi-channel distribution; when at least two, but not all, channels are fully integrated, it is referred to as cross channel distribution (Berman & Thelen, 2018). Overall, multi-channel retail may be defined as the actions included

in selling items and services over more than all accessible channels or one channel, while the consumer is unable to engage with the retailer and/or the retailer is unable to regulate channel integration. As a result, channels coexist without the ability for customers to initiate contact or for retailers to regulate integration (Beck & Rygl, 2015). The phrase "multi-channel" refers to channels that lack combination and interplay (Verhoef et al., 2007; Avery et al., 2012). A cross-channel retailer, on the other hand, sells services or products through all accessible channels or more than one channel, with the consumer having partial control over partly integrated channels and/or the retailer having control over the partially integrated channels (Beck & Rygl, 2015). One of the most important aspects of the cross-channel strategy is that separate channels or touchpoints be interconnected and integrated (De Faultrier et al., 2014).

Omnichannel distribution

The third paradigm, omnichannel distribution, is currently among the hottest topics in retail and supply chain publications. This paradigm embraces keywords such as smart tourism, gamification, augmented reality, mobile applications and smartphones, collective economy, tourist experience, tourist engagement, and online browsing. Technology (e.g., smartphones, apps, communal economy, gamification, and augmented reality) serves as an infrastructure in smart tourism, combining hardware, software, and network technologies to assist stakeholders in making better-informed decisions (Gretzel et al., 2015; Dorcic et al., 2019; Zhu et al., 2019). It also helps the decision-making process by enhancing visitor experience and engagement by collaborating with local people and other tourists in locations (Buhalis & Amaranggana, 2014; Xu et al., 2017; Dorcic et al., 2019; Garcia et al., 2019). For instance, gamification serves as a new way for tourists to engage in all travel stages; not only does it let destinations influence tourists' behavior, it also provides new opportunities to gain insight into the actual behavior of tourists (Negrusa et al., 2015).

Much of the existing literature considers tourism distribution channels as a tool at wholesaler's disposal for communicating with customers, yet, Jørgensen (2017) claimed in the article titled "Reframing Tourism Distribution" that giving out system is composed of three basic components: Tourist, supplier, and intermediary, hence, distribution can be regarded as the interaction among these three actors. As noted in the third paradigm, the role of technology in integrating different elements of distribution and in immediately creating constant interaction and communication with tourists to improve their experience was observed.

This paradigm is known as omnichannel distribution because it allows for complete engagement and integration of all channels from the customer's and retailer's viewpoints (Berman & Thelen, 2018), providing a similar experience for the customer across different channels (Saghiri et al., 2017). Omni-channel distribution system offers multiple selling channels like online and offline channels, including mobile, telephone, print catalogs, etc. Nowadays, the tourism industry ought to upgrade tourist facilities innovatively and integrate all marketing channels to raise revenue and achieve essential competencies. In this system, the tourist can search, buy, and give feedback by using all channels and information (Park & Park, 2016). In general, omnichannel retailing refers to all actions included in selling products or services across all accessible channels, with the consumer having full control over the channels and the merchant having complete control over the channels. As a result, because the consumer may interact completely and/or the retailer can control fully integrated channels, an omnichannel retailer sells goods and services through all accessible channels (Beck & Rygl, 2015).

As previously stated in the preceding sections, omnichannel distribution is the current paradigm of tourist distribution channels, which underlines full integration and full interaction. In this regard, in the following section, a future research trend within this context is examined.

Future research agenda

This paper tended to stress the importance of tourism distribution channels as an appealing area with potential development in the future. Reviewing prior studies confirmed the research growth in the field of tourism distribution channels so that 776 articles were published in this context and citations reached the total number of 10037 in 2018, expressing a remarkable growth when compared with previous years. From our perspective, further investigation of tourism distribution channels can be administered in these regards.

In omnichannel literature, concepts of full interaction and full integration are employed to explain omnichannel (Beck & Rygl, 2015). Interaction refers to the customer's communication with channels and touchpoints, in turn, integration denotes the retailer's efforts to provide channels and touchpoints for the customer. Despite studies on interaction and integration in the field of retailing (Saghiri et al., 2017; Wiener et al., 2018; Marchet et al., 2018), there is a gap in tourism and leisure research. It is therefore recommended to succeeding researchers in this field to provide

frameworks for applying the full integration of tourism distribution channels from business owners' perspective. In addition, studies should be carried out to develop frameworks for tourists' full interaction with brands. As claimed in previous literature, omnichannel research can be executed in three phases; developing, running, and monitoring (Saghiri et al., 2018). With literature review, it has been determined that research has been accomplished in regard to developing and running omnichannel retailing (Manser Payne et al., 2017; Saghiri et al., 2017; Larke et al., 2018; Rasini et al., 2018; Wiener et al., 2018; Berman & Thelen, 2018; Marchet et al., 2018). Yet, no study has been executed concerning monitoring omnichannel retailing. This study also revealed that in the tourist and leisure industry no research has been carried out so far to provide frameworks for developing, running, and monitoring omnichannel systems. Thus, researchers are advised to investigate tourism distribution channels in future studies for establishing frameworks to create, maintain, and track omnichannel systems in the tourism and leisure field.

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