

## Adapting to the Era of Independent Tourism: Challenges and Opportunities for Travel Agencies

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### Abstract

Independent tourism has grown rapidly with current technological advancements throughout generations of tourism. However, younger tourists make up a larger portion of this industry. The Independent Tourist era has presented new challenges and opportunities for the travel industry. It looks at how the expansion of travel alternatives in terms of destinations, modes of transportation, and activities due to the growth of digital platforms and easy access to information. Tourists can now make the best decisions for their preferences to the customization and personalization planning for their journey. This paper presents a conceptual paper, employing a systematic review methodology of the challenges and opportunities facing travel agencies amidst the era of independent tourism. Hence, the purpose of this paper is to enhance comprehension of this domain and identify potential gaps in existing literature pertaining to this subject matter. Based on the finding, most of the scholars support that travel agents must contend with growing competition, shifting consumer expectations, and altered value offerings because of these developments. It necessitates that travel agencies use technology to enhance their offerings while concentrating on offering specialized knowledge, customized travel package deals, and distinctive experiences for travel agencies at go above and beyond what is available to Free independent tourists. Travel agencies may find innovative ways to provide worthwhile experiences and exclusive access to places by collaborating with local partners, destination management organizations, and tour operators. Travel agencies can survive and thrive in a competitive travel market by embracing the era of independent travel and changing their business model.

*Keywords:* - Travel agency, independent tourism, challenges, opportunities

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## 1. Introduction

The tourism sector encompasses diverse options of travel, particularly Free Independent Travel (FIT) presenting distinctive experiences and opportunities for travelers. FIT facilitates customized exploration of destinations, tailored to individual preferences and interests, thereby offering a personalized travel experience. This mode significantly influences the tourism landscape, reflecting varied consumer demands and contributing to

industry's dynamic nature. In the mid-20th century. In the mid-20th century, the tourism industry has long been dominated by traditional package tours, (Crous-Costa et al., 2023). These tours provide a convenient and cost-effective way for people to travel, offering an itinerary that includes transportation, accommodation and activities. Travel agencies play an important role in organizing these tours, ensuring a smooth and stress-free travel experience for tourists. Undergoing with the advent of the internet and the rise of digital platforms, the tourism landscape has

undergone significant changes. FIT has become an increasingly popular travel trend, and its market has grown globally. These changes require a drastic shift for travel agency operators to meet changing market demands. The travel agencies have needed to comprehend the evolving dynamics of tourist preferences and behaviors, focusing on personalized experiences and flexibility in travel arrangements. Due to this, travel agencies must overcome several challenges and opportunities of this new market development to maintain their operations.

This paper distinguishes itself from previous research by providing a comprehensive analysis of the challenges and opportunities that travel agencies face in the context of the rising Free Independent Traveler (FIT) trend. Unlike earlier studies, which predominantly focused on either traditional package tours or the initial emergence of digital travel platforms, this research delves into the contemporary landscape where independent tourism is increasingly prevalent. By examining how travel agencies can effectively respond to and capitalize on the growing demand for personalized travel experiences (Yang, 2022). This paper offers novel insights and practical recommendations that contribute to the ongoing discourse on the evolution of the tourism industry. Specifically, the paper aims to explore the challenges and opportunities faced by travel agencies as they adapt to the shift towards independent tourism.

## 2. Literature Review

The tourism industry has significantly transformed post-COVID-19, particularly with the rise of independent tourism, where travelers increasingly plan and book their trips online, by passing traditional travel agencies. This shift, driven by technological advancements and changing consumer preferences, offers greater control and flexibility to travelers (Lu, 2023) but poses substantial challenges for travel agencies. These agencies, historically essential for organizing travel plans and securing cost-effective solutions, now face reduced customer bases and must reevaluate their business models to stay relevant (Abrate et al., 2019). The research problem centers on understanding the impact of independent tourism on traditional travel agencies, highlighting the challenges of digital transformation, adapting to new consumer demands for flexibility and customization, and maintaining competitive pricing. Despite these challenges, there are significant opportunities for agencies to innovate by leveraging technology, offering value-added services, and providing personalized travel experiences (Elgarhy & Abou-Shouk, 2022).

### 2.1 An Overview of The Shift Toward Independent Tourism

The tourism industry has shown rapid development after the world was shocked by the covid-19 pandemic. According to the Statista Research Department, 2023. A 41% increase in tourist spending in 2022 compared to the

previous year and is expected to reach 2.29 trillion U.S. dollars in 2023. Travel agencies serve as pivotal players within the tourism industry. They act as intermediaries' parties, bridging the gap between travelers and the various tourism elements to their trips. By offering services such as flight and accommodation booking, transportation arrangements, tour guides, and travel agencies simplify planning processes for individuals and groups (Foster & Bentley, 2022). Beyond convenience, they provide expertise, helping clients navigate the complexities of travel. In addition, agencies engage in negotiations with suppliers to get cost-effective solutions that may be difficult for independent tourists to find. Amidst a time characterized by an excessive amount of knowledge, travel firms provide customized suggestions and individualized encounters, rendering them essential for several world travelers.

Tourists can be categorized using different criteria, such as their personality traits, demographic characteristics, level of experience, and the purpose of their travel. In recent years, tourists have become more independent due to online information, technology, and changes in the tourism landscape (Pencarelli, 2019). The rise of independent tourism, which is characterized by individuals planning their own trips online without relying on travel agencies or package tours (Sutyryna et al., 2021). It is illustrated that independent vacation planning is booming today's travel market, which is becoming more personalized, digitalized and independent from giant tour operators (Polukhina et al., 2020). This form of tourism allows travelers to have greater control and flexibility over their itineraries, as they can choose their destinations, activities, and accommodations according to their preferences and interests. The pattern and characteristics of independent tourism include a tendency to have individualistic tendencies and prioritize their own satisfaction and personal interests when selecting destinations. Their behavior during the trip is also focused on individual experiences and enjoyment (He et al., 2021). They engage in extensive information search to gather knowledge about potential destinations, accommodations, transportation, and activities. They rely heavily on online resources, reviews, recommendations from friends and family, and social media platforms to make informed decisions (Sutyryna et al., 2021). Research and previous studies have highlighted that sociodemographic factor such as age and gender, as well as travel characteristics like length of stay and previous travel experience, can affect tourists' preference for independent travel arrangements or packaged travel arrangements (Boto-García et al., 2022).

The concept of independent travel involves individuals arranging, customizing, and planning their own trips without relying on tour operators. It can also be defined as the people who travel on their own and explore destinations without relying on organized tours or travel agencies. It allows tourists to have more control over their itinerary and experience and emphasizes autonomy, independence, and freedom (Boonkaew et al., 2023). According to the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), over

57% of visitors from other countries travelled independently in 2019. They usually travel alone or in small groups and plan their own trips. There are several factors attributed to the rise of independent tourism, including technological advancements, changing consumer preferences, and a desire for unique travel experiences.

Independent tourism has also grown due to economic factors, as tourists can choose accommodations, dining, and activities based on their budgets (Chung et al., 2020). However, contribution to the travel agent business is minimal since independent tourists do not rely on their services. To attract the market of independent tourists, travel agencies must modify their business strategies and offerings (Liu et al., 2020). They are taking this action to satisfy the demands of these savvy and capable tourists. Travel agencies must recognize and solve the unique difficulties they face to adjust to this new era. It presents challenges for traditional travel agencies, but also offers new opportunities for innovation and adaptation for the travel industry. To stay relevant, travel agencies need to adapt to changing traveler preferences, embrace technology, and add value to the independent travel experience (Pencarelli et al., 2021). According to Mihajlović (2020), travel agencies that traditionally market tourist packages and specialize in the sale of packages are expected to face challenges due to this shift in tourist behavior.

## ***2.2 The Challenges for Travel Agencies in the Age of Independent Tourist***

The development of technology has changed the landscape and human thinking for travel. They can get information quickly and easily so they can make plans according to their taste and budget (Pai et al., 2020; Agarwal et al., 2020). Based on previous studies there are several challenges faced by travel agencies. Basically, the role of a travel agency has been to help tourists plan and organize their trips and ensure a smooth and enjoyable travel experience such as booking flight tickets and arranging tours. The evolution of online travel booking platforms has reshaped the travel landscape, diminishing reliance on traditional agencies (Jin & Hu, 2022; Rafdinal, 2021). Travelers now enjoy autonomy to research, compare, and directly book flights, accommodations, and activities through online platforms (Agarwal et al., 2020; Pai et al., 2020). These resources offer convenience, extensive information, and competitive pricing, altering consumer behavior. This trend has led to a diminished flow of potential customers towards travel agencies, reducing opportunities for agencies to showcase their expertise, build relationships, and provide tailored solutions (Xiao et al., 2021; Youssef & Zeqiri, 2022).

The challenge of adaptation to changing customer preferences and expectations is another key challenge for travel agencies in the age of independent tourism. Independent tourist preference and expectation on the flexibility and customization of their travel experiences.

They seek personalized itineraries, unique and authentic experiences, and the freedom to make their own choices during their trips (Pai et al., 2021). Other than that, they also expect quick and efficient communication, seamless online booking processes, and immediate access to information and assistance. In addition, independent tourists often prioritize cost savings and are more willing to spend time researching and planning their own trips to find the best deals and experiences (Kan, 2022). Furthermore, they expect quick and efficient communication, seamless online booking processes, and immediate access to information and assistance (Monterey & Borbon, 2021; Hsu et al., 2020). Technological advancements and the need for digital transformation as challenge to travel agency. In the era of independent tourism, travel agencies should investigate methods to leverage technology to improve their services and maintain their competitiveness. This includes the implementation of online booking systems, the enhancement of their website and online presence, and the promotion and consumer engagement via social media platforms (Chen et al., 2021). Additionally, they can focus on offering specialized knowledge and expertise in niche markets, providing personalized recommendations and itineraries based on customer preferences, and offering exceptional customer service and support throughout the travel process (Ryan et al., 2023). Travel agencies may also contemplate forming strategic alliances with online booking platforms and websites to increase their visibility and appeal to a greater number of independent tourists (Ryan et al., 2023).

## ***2.3 Opportunities for Travel Agencies in Independent Tourist***

While independent tourists may be less dependent on traditional travel agencies for information and reservations, there are still some opportunities for the agency to success in this market (IvyPanda, 2023). The travel agency can provide value-added service to meet the needs and special preferences of an independent tourist including offering customized routes, suggestions for activities, and unique experiences that cannot be obtained if they are booked online (Aboushouk & Tamamm, 2023). Other than that, it includes arranging transportation, accommodation, and activities, as well as offering 24/7 support and assistance in case of any problem or emergency. In addition, travel agencies can leverage their expertise and relationships with suppliers to negotiate better deals and discounts for independent tourists. The desire for flexibility and freedom is one of the key characteristics of an independent tourist. They often prefer to have the flexibility to plan their own itinerary and make spontaneous decisions during their trip. This presents an opportunity for travel agencies to offer flexible and customizable packages that cater to the individual preferences and interests of independent tourists (Pencarelli, 2019). Furthermore, travel agencies can also utilize technology to their advantage in catering to independent tourists. They can develop user-friendly

online platforms and mobile apps that allow independent tourists to easily research, book, and manage their trips. Other than that, they can leverage technology to improve online presence, automate tasks, provide personalized services, and enhance communication and collaboration with service providers (Guo et al., 2023). Overall, travel agencies can adapt their services and strategies to meet the changing demands of independent tourists and position themselves as valuable partners in the planning and execution of independent travel experiences. This aligns with the findings of various studies that emphasize the impact of technology on tourism and the importance of catering to the preferences of independent travelers (Guo et al., 2023; Rafiq et al., 2022).

### 3. Methodology

This is a conceptual paper based on a literature study in tourism and hospitality using a systematic review. According to (Oman Medical Journal, 2022) a systematic review is a specific and reproducible method to search, identify, select, appraise, and summarize all studies relevant to a particular field (Liu et al., 2022). Therefore, this systematic review was based on online open-access journal articles and open-access theses and dissertations from the website (Arabadzhyan et al., 2020), to investigate and analyze extant literature concerning the challenge and opportunity and various strategies employed by travel agencies to cater to the trend of independent tourism.

The researcher reviewed the literature for 5 years, from 2019 to 2023 to ensure the inclusion of the most recent and relevant studies. The findings from this paper are based on secondary sources of data. To identify relevant studies, the database searches using the keywords “independent tourism”, “travel agency”, Digital era on tourism and hospitality industry, "challenge and opportunity on travel agency "impact of independent tourism to travel agency business,” and “travel agency business strategies for adapting to independent tourism.". Studies were excluded if the literature did not focus on the specified themes and were not published within the specified timeframe.

From the review’s findings, a comprehensive view was made to understand the challenges and opportunities faced by travel agencies in catering to the trend of independent tourism. The systematic review also delved into the various strategies employed by travel agencies to adapt to the digital era and the impact of independent tourism on their business. This comprehensive analysis provides valuable insights into the evolving trend of independent tourism, shedding light on the implications for travel agencies and their operational strategies.

### 4. Result and Discussion

The growing trend in independent tourism represents both challenges and opportunities for travel agencies. Thus, travel agents are required to modify their business strategies and offers to meet the demands of this type of

tourist (Pencarelli, 2019). This section discusses the findings in depth, focusing on five key strategies that travel agencies can adopt to cater to the needs of independent tourists.

#### 4.1 Embracing Digital Platforms and Online Presence

Embracing digital platforms and online presence is crucial for travel agencies aiming to attract independent tourists (Buhalis & Sinarta, 2019). Online travel agencies and booking systems enable travel agencies to provide the high level of involvement and real-time experience creation that independent tourists seek (Adam et al., 2023). Incorporating personalization of services and expert recommendations into online tourism systems can replicate the personalized experience and expertise offered by traditional travel agencies (Wang, 2020). Moreover, prioritizing the incorporation of the latest technological advancements is essential to meet the expectations of tech-savvy independent tourists (Chamboko-Mpotaringa & Tichaawa, 2023). This involves allocating more budget to upgrade technology and ensuring staff are trained in the latest advancements to provide efficient service (Arnold et al., 2022). The impact of digitalization and infrastructure development on domestic tourism has been recognized, indicating the significance of technology in shaping the tourism landscape (Arteeva et al., 2022). Additionally, the role of information and communication technologies in sustainable independent tourism has been highlighted, emphasizing the influence of technology on the development and promotion of independent travel experiences (Zhang et al., 2021). Overall, the integration of technology in the tourism sector aligns with the preferences of independent tourists for autonomy and flexibility, enhancing the overall customer experience and contributing to the resilience and adaptability of the tourism industry.

#### 4.2 Developing Tailored Packages for Independent Tourist

Next strategy is developing tailored packages for independent tourists. The development of tailored packages for independent travelers involves creating customizable itineraries, offering unique experiences, and catering to specific interests and preferences (Tarantino et al., 2019). This could involve offering modular itineraries, where travelers can pick and choose elements such as accommodations, activities, and transportation. To achieve this, the integration of technology and the use of metaheuristic algorithms can be employed to improve itinerary recommendations for tourists, allowing for personalized orienteering and enhancing the overall customer experience (Tenemaza et al., 2020; Pilato et al., 2023). Additionally, the utilization of personalized travel itineraries with multi-access edge computing touristic services can further contribute to meeting the preferences of independent travelers by considering factors such as the popularity of points of interest, visitor's preferences, and

time limits to complete the tour (Fonseca et al., 2019). Furthermore, user preferential tour recommendation based on Point of Interest (POI)-embedding methods can provide a finer representation of POI types and optimize time and locational constraints based on past trajectories from similar tourists, aligning with the desire for autonomy while still offering expertise (Ho & Lim, 2021).

#### **4.3 Enhancing Customer Engagement and Communication**

Enhancing customer engagement and communication is essential in addressing the current challenges in the tourism industry. Travel agencies can leverage various digital platforms such as email newsletters, social media interactions, and webinars to engage with potential and past customers (Nagaraj et al., 2020). The integration of artificial intelligence and robotics in the tourism sector can significantly improve customer engagement and traveler experience (Carvalho et al., 2022; Ivanov & Webster, 2019). Prompt responses to inquiries and offering genuine advice can position agencies as valuable sources of information, thereby enhancing customer engagement (Liu & Chen, 2023; Dudek et al., 2019). Furthermore, the use of customer engagement technologies can impact service innovation in a network of travel agencies, influencing sales channels, customer relationships, and retail marketing policies (Hollebeek & Rather, 2019). By valuing independent travelers and employing effective communication strategies, travel agencies can foster customer loyalty and satisfaction, encouraging these travelers to seek further assistance from the agencies (Zhang & Li, 2022; Kan, 2022).

#### **4.4 Investing in Data Analytics and Personalized Marketing**

To add up, it is undeniable that research on related matters should also be taken into action. Travel agencies should be investing more in data analytics and personalized marketing to spectate and study the thorough aspects of an independent traveler (Humagain, 2019). Collecting and analyzing data on customer preferences, behaviors, and past travel experiences can empower travel agencies to offer targeted and personalized recommendations (Cho et al., 2022). The integration of data analytics and personalized marketing in travel agencies has the potential to significantly enhance the customer experience by providing tailored offers and suggestions aligned with each traveler's interests. Real-time access to personalized information and customer service is an expectation in the tourism and hospitality industry, highlighting the importance of personalized approaches (Buhalis & Sinarta, 2019) personalized approach not only enhances the customer experience but also showcases the agency's ability to provide relevant and valuable services (Xie et al., 2020).

#### **4.5 Upskilling and Training for Travel Agency Staff**

The upskilling and training of staff within travel agencies are essential for adapting to the changing landscape of independent tourism and ensuring a competitive edge in the industry. Ultimately, it is own responsibilities of travel agencies to improve and provide training for their staff with a view to the competitive surroundings of industry. Adapting to the changing landscape of independent tourism requires a well-equipped and knowledgeable staff (Beqiri & Trakaniqi, 2021). Travel agency employees should be trained to understand the needs of independent travelers and equipped with skills to provide relevant guidance (Angeloni & Rossi, 2020). Training can encompass using digital tools effectively, honing communication skills for remote interactions, and staying updated on the latest industry trends. An upskilled staff with better knowledge and good communication skills might potentially change the point of view of an independent traveler to trust travel agencies for a better service.

### **5. Conclusion**

The rise of independent tourism presents both challenges and opportunities for travel agencies. Our paper reveals that the increasing popularity of independent travel is driven by technological advancements, a shift in consumer preferences towards personalized experiences, and a growing desire for unique, authentic travel adventures (Lee et al., 2022). This trend necessitates a strategic response from travel agencies to remain competitive and relevant in the evolving market landscape. This paper highlights that travel agencies can leverage digital platforms and artificial intelligence to enhance customer engagement and meet the expectations of free independent travellers. By utilizing these technologies, agencies can offer personalized recommendations, streamlined booking processes, and real-time support, thereby increasing customer satisfaction and loyalty (Pillai & Sivathanu, 2020). Furthermore, the paper underscores the importance of effective communication strategies in fostering strong relationships with customers, which is crucial for retaining their business in a competitive market (Hollebeek & Rather, 2019).

Adapting to the rise of independent tourism requires travel agencies to develop specialized knowledge and expertise. Our findings suggest that agencies should focus on offering customized travel packages that cater to the specific preferences and needs of individual travellers. This involves curating itineraries that provide distinctive and memorable experiences, such as exclusive access to local attractions and events that independent travellers may not easily discover on their own (Zhang et al., 2020). Additionally, the paper emphasizes the value of collaboration with local partners and tour operators. Such partnerships can enhance the agency's offerings by providing unique services and insider knowledge, which are highly valued by independent travellers seeking

authentic experiences. By forging strong local connections, travel agencies can deliver exclusive opportunities that set them apart from competitors (Islahuddin et al., 2022).

In conclusion, the paper indicates that to adaptation the challenge and opportunity in this industry, travel agencies must embrace a multifaceted approach to thrive in the era of independent tourism by integrating advanced technologies, developing specialized expertise, and fostering local partnerships, agencies can effectively meet the demands of modern travellers. This strategic will not only enhance customer satisfaction but also ensure the long-term success and sustainability of travel agencies in a rapidly changing industry landscape.

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